WINTER

COMPLETE COWBOY MAGAZINE

NOVEL BY T. W. FORD

WINTER

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WILD WESTERN STORIES

REDEMPTION TRAIL

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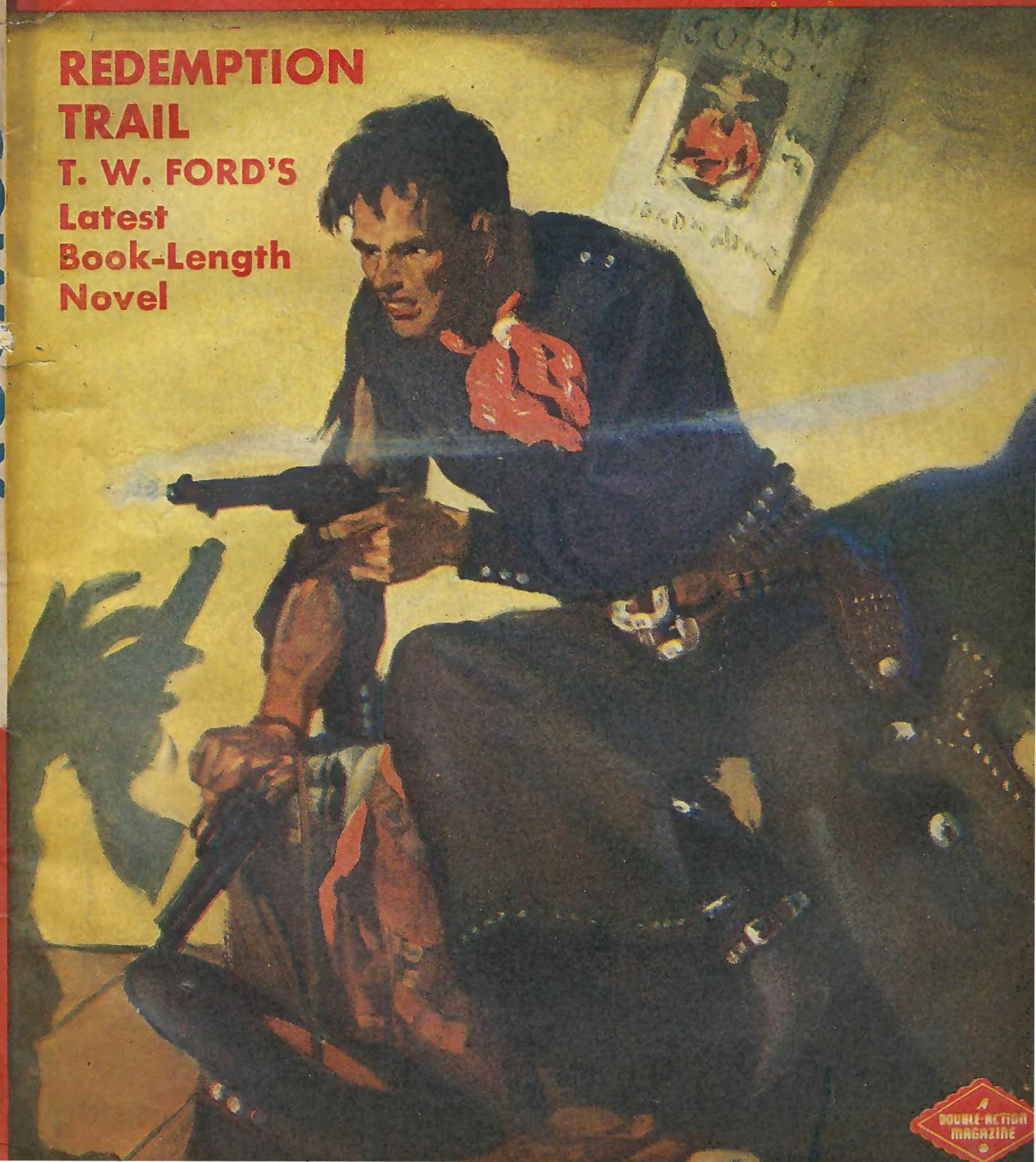

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COMPLETE COWBOY

WILD WESTERN STORIES

Vol. 6 **Winter, 1946** **No. 4**

OUTSTANDING NEW WESTERN NOVEL

REDEMPTION TRAIL ..... By T. W. Ford 10

He was Dana Rank, hated and feared boss of the Slash-R, then suddenly, he was nobody, hunted by the law and his former segundo alike. And little by little as he tried to fight his way back, he began to realize why the name Rank made honest men spit. But what recompense could he make now?

SHORT STORIES

PEACE WANTED AT GABRIEL'S TRUMP.. By C. D. Richardson, Jr. 85

Meet Saddlesoap Keech and Bill Ratchet, two salty hombres who've sworn they'll never shoot their guns again, but don't aim to be trampled on, either!

A MESSAGE FOR LOST MULE ..... By Chester B. Conant 90

Once an outlaw's horse, Blanco now had a desperate journey to make if outlaws were to be cleaned up.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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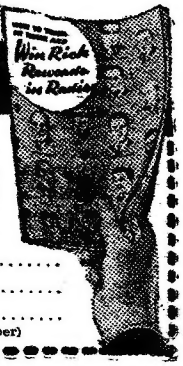

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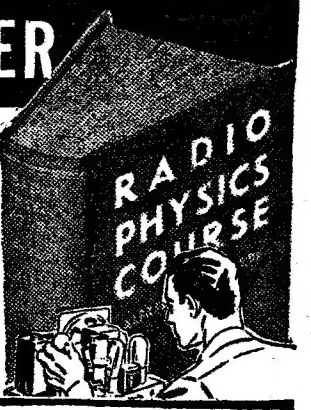

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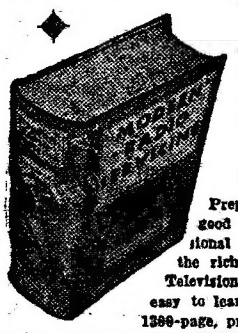

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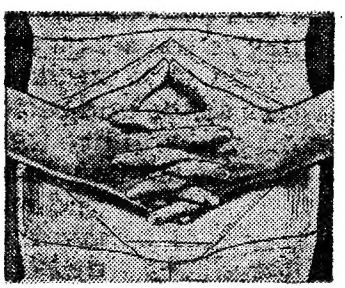

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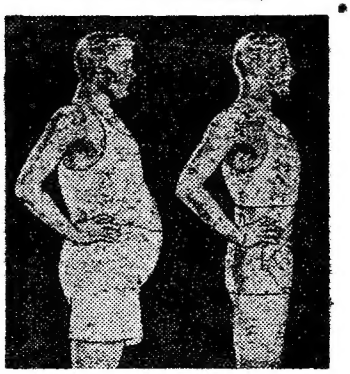

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REDEMPTION

Suspenseful

Child of poverty, land-hunger drilled into him by his father, Dana Rank rose to be the dreaded and hated boss of Gunshot Valley. Then came the accident that stripped him of power and position, and left him with the bitter realization of the evil he had done. And his life was that of a hunted man, grimly devoted to both revenge and redemption.

Dana Rank tried to jump clear of the overturning coach.

TRAIL

New Book-Length Novel

By T. W. FORD

(Author of "Dead Triggers," "Five Graves To Gunsmoke")

THE LITTLE cavalcade of horsemen swung to the top of the low rise on the trail to Union Hill. The handsome imperious man at the head threw up his arm and they reined to a halt. He was Dana Rank, boss of Shotgun Valley. Rank and his segundo, also crack trigger-slammer of a gunman spread, —Will Keene, rode out a few yards from the rest. Keene had the same hawkish nose of his boss; they were second cousins.

Rank himself was a handsome brute, black-headed with a haughty manner accounted by long gray eyes and big square-set shoulders. He was still in his twenties, incredibly young to be owner of a huge outfit like the Slash-R and boss of the Shotgun. He

face was flat-cheeked with a wide, generous mouth that could clamp into a vise of ruthlessness. A gleaming-black carefully shaped mustache gave him the air of a dandy; he let his hair grow in long sideburns down before the ears to add to the effect. His rig was expensive, topped by a black gold-studded Mex bolero over a white silk shirt open at his powerful throat. When he let his gray eyes run sleepily over a woman, he was a picture few of them could resist.

Now, he let the gray eyes rest on the group of ranch buildings over in a little hollow to the right of the trail. No smoke came from the chimney of the cook shack of the place below. Nothing stirred on it; it was deserted.

"Well, I got that outfit," Rank said in his low controlled voice. "In a few hours, it'll become a legal part of the Slash-R. It'll give me all the land along Little Bonnet Creek. *All* the land." He savored the words.

"Yep," said Will Keene, a tinge of envy behind his voice. He'd have liked it better if Dana had said it would give "us" all the land along the creek instead of "me." Will felt he had a right to be included.

Rank lifted one of his long arms to point. "Too bad that damn rustler, Hawes, put up such a fight against the lawmen they had to burn him outa the barn."

"Yep," Keene agreed, and looked for a humorous twinkle in his second cousin's eye. There was none. Dana Rank was so obsessed with acquiring range land and more range land that he had come to believe the charges he used as an excuse to dispossess the owner of another spread.

HOOFBEATS sounded from behind the clump of woods at the other side of the rise. The hands of the men in the Rank bunch slid down over holster tops with unconscious instinct. A lone rider wheeled into view, coming at a hand lope. Will Keene shaded his eyes against the sun glare.

"The youngest of the Toby brothers—Lynn," he said.

The rider came up the slope, a lean gangling button not yet twenty. Arrogantly the Slash-R men sat blocking the strip of alkali. Flushing, the Toby kid was forced to cut into the brush to pass. He gave Dana a curt nod. Dana laughed.

"I'll be offering them a price for their outfit next. And if they don't take it. . . . " Dana Rank picked up the reins and they moved on.

A few miles further on, where Little Bonnet joined Big Bonnet Creek, Rank turned off the main trail and followed the track along Little Bonnet. When they came to the tiny ramshackle store crouched where the creek split, Rank dropped off and Keene swore under his breath, but automatically, trailed him up the creaky steps, head swivelling slowly, thumbs hooked in gunbelt. Wags in Shotgun Valley said Will Keene must be tethered to his boss the way he followed him always.

They entered and the Widow McTigue, a gray-haired cheerful mite of a woman, hurried in from the rear. Rank swept off his sombrero and bowed low over her hand.

"How is business, Mrs. McTigue? Guess more than one rider uses an excuse to buy something for a look at your pretty face."

"Oh, the blarney of you, Mr. Rank," she said, flushing.

"It's Mr. Dana," came a childish cry of delight. And the widow's ten-year-old daughter came hurrying from the room behind into the store, her light cane skittering over the floor before her. In her impulsive rush, she veered and stumbled over a flour sack with a little cry. Dana Rank swooped toward her in a flash and swung her high in his arms, chuckling. Frances McTigue had been blind almost since birth.

"Didn't I warn you about those Injuns in ambush, Francis? One of them tripped you with his bow and arrow that time, by grab! Ha-ha!" The child squealed with delight as he tossed her up and caught her again.

"What color clothes are you wearing today, Dana?"

"*Mister* Dana, it is Frances," warned the mother.

"And why can't the young lady I'm

going to marry some day call me by my first name, I'd like to know?" Rank sat down on a keg with the girl on his knee. "Well, first off, I'm wearing that black bolero with the gold embroidery you like so much. Under that, I've got on. . . ." Unhurriedly, down to every last detail, he described to her what he was wearing. He told her a story about finding a dogie bogged down in a mud-hole last week and snagging it out while the mother cow watched from the side.

Will Keene scraped a boot restlessly.

RANK PUT the child down and told her to run out on the porch to be ready to kiss him goodbye. When she had gone, he told the widow he had heard from that eye specialist from the East who was crossing the country. "He's going to let me know when he expects to be in St Louis. Then you're going to take Frances up there to see him, Mrs. McTigue."

She tried to speak but her voice choked off. She simply touched one of young Rank's powerful arms. He chuckled it all off. Before he departed he left a ten dollar bill on the counter.

"You get Frances a couple or so of those nice dresses they show in the catalogues of the mail order house. Make them bright ones. She loves colors, Mrs. McTigue."

"But she can't see, Mr. Rank."

"I know. . . But a woman—well, she can feel those things."

On the way out, he stopped as usual to eye the age-yellowed homemade map pinned on the wall beside the door. It was a map of Shotgun Valley inked out by some surveyor passing through. His nostrils drew in as he sucked air while he let his eyes rove over it. He nodded, said softly:

"The day will come, Will, the day will come when I own every acre of the Valley. . . . Every acre and every last foot and smack down to every *last inch*. . . ."

The intensity of that low voice was a little terrifying.

"Don't try to go too fast, Dana," Will Keene muttered.

"Too fast? Hell! I've been going too slow, Will. I got Union Hill in my back pocket. I've picked up a heap of land around the Slash-R. I got power up and down the Valley. But, now, I'm going faster, by grab!"

"Careful, Dana. You've made a lot of enemies. They—"

"And broken them!"

"You ain't got many friends—if anything went wrong."

"Friends? Hell, you can buy all of them you want. Folks respect me and are afeared of me. That's all that counts." He spread out his hand, palm up, below the map. "Some day soon—I'll have all of it, like this!" His hand closed up into a squeezing fist. . . .

CHAPTER II

IN THE STIFF airless parlor of the modest white house up at the top of the hill outside of town, Dana Rank sat fidgeting for almost forty minutes by the big hunting-case watch left him by his father. Lucinda Hemley, his fiancee, had always dangled him on the end of a string. Rank was sole heir of the great Slash-R, the most powerful man in Shotgun Valley, owner of a big chunk of Union Hill itself. Yet he had proposed three times to the pale lemon-blond girl before she had deigned to accept him.

She finally entered the room, a stately girl in pure starched white despite the crushing heat of the day. She had a way of seeming detached and frigid, the black eyes distant. The thin small-mouthed face gave her an aura of fragility. But Will Keene, as he climbed to his feet, didn't miss the promising curves of her body.

"Dana. . . . " She held her hand for him to kiss. "And how are things out at the ranch?"

He hovered over her proudly. She would make a fit mistress for the great Slash-R. Wearing a set smile, Keene studied her and wondered if she mightn't be too good to be true.

Mrs. Hemley fluttered in, an

emaciated bustling woman. She monopolized Dana's attention. Lucinda bent to straighten the black bow of her pump, the white material falling away from her shoulders. Will Keene stared, then his face flamed as he realized the girl was watching him. But her eyes were not outraged, simply appraising. Mrs. Hemley was called to the back door.

"Go on down to the post-office and get the mail. It'll save me time," Dana said. It was seldom he was alone with his strictly chaperoned fiancee.

Leaving, Keene appraised himself with new interest before the mirror in the hall. The way that girl had looked at him. . . . He had the hook nose of the Rank clan, but there the resemblance to Dana halted. Keene was shorter, thick-bodied, with dull flat-set eyes. Stubborn watchfulness stamped his face. As he stepped out, he spat into the grass. That cousin of his got everything, everything. .

A little later, Dana Rank walked his pony down into thriving bustling Union Hill. There was the hint of a pouting look on his swarthy face. Lucinda sure kept him at arm's length, all right. But at least he had got her to move the wedding ahead to next week. Still. . .

Men along the sidewalk, on ponies, nodded and called out respectfully as he moved along. Some sneered behind his back, threw a curse after him. But not to his face; after all, he was the power in Shotgun Valley. More than a few were in debt to the bank controlled by him. Many rented property he owned. All of them knew the judge and sheriff were his men, hand-picked and owing allegiance to him. Even the lawless ones, the wanted men, who passed through Union knew they stayed only so long as they did not interfere in any way with Mr. Dana Rank or run afoul of any of his plans.

"All I have to do is pull the string —and every last man-jack of 'em will jump," Dana Rank said to himself. "Two-bits. Nobody big enough to buck me, by grab. . . . Ain't a gent you can't buy—or scare the britches off of, if you don't hanker to pay their price."

Judge Philo Haines emerged from The Eldorado on the corner across from the bank, wiping his white mustaches with gusto. When he sighted Dana Rank he jerked his hand down, drew his chicken-breasted little body up pompously, and bowed.

"Rank! You dirty snake—fill your hand!" It was a scream coming from a lean, wild-eyed man who'd leaped from an alley beside one of the saltier whisky mills of the town. It was Gene Selvin, one-time owner of the Rafter-S, another outfit Rank had taken over to add to his great Slash-R. It had been simple, that job. Rank had simply dammed up the shallow river that ran across the north end of his place and fed Rafter-S land. Thus he had been able to cut Selvin's stock down to a mere trickle of water whenever he pleased.

Selvin was drunk. He had been drinking hard in town for weeks since being forced into bankruptcy. But savage, long-gnawing fury made him steady and as dangerous as a coiled snake. Two big Colts spiked from his bony hands. His sweating face glittered with a murderous light.

RANK WAS alone, caught without Keene or his gun spread. There were men present, Dana knew, who'd like to see him mowed down; and he was already covered. Scuttling sideward, he drew. Selvin's weapons whiplashed lead. One bullet drilled the cloth of Rank's shirt sleeve. But, steely-nerved, he rode those triggers. Lead took Selvin through the right shoulder, lifted him off his thin legs, pinned him against a corner of the whisky mill. Then he sank into a pitiful little heap.

Rank's gun pack came racing down the line from both directions. Will Keene came cat-footing it along the sidewalk, drawing bead.

"Holster it!" roared Rank.

"But he's been swearing to git you, Dana! He's locoed—"

"Pen that gun! Somebody get the doc!. . . . Take Selvin down to the

hotel and tell them to give him what he needs. Dana Rank is paying the bill." He strode on, remembering when Gene Selvin was a hard-working, laughing man who could shake the liveliest leg at the schoolhouse dances.

Rank entered the bar beside the jailhouse and quickly dumped down two slugs. Following him, Keene put down the mail. Dana fingered it restlessly and Keene proceeded to give him the news he had picked up. Judge Haines was drinking right heavily. And:

"The Toby brothers are bringing in a special gunslinger, Dana. Andy Beaker, it is. In the Panhandle, he's rated plumb poison!"

"Beaker? Sure, I've heard of him. . . . Hmmm. We better have the sheriff make a ruling on importing gunslicks. And the Tobys ought to have more sense. They can't beat me nowise."

"And that protective association of the small ranchers that Hawes was trying to organize before he got—uh—busted—well, they say some of the little fellas are working on it undercover anyways."

Rank cocked a sneering eyebrow, his old self again. "Well, well. Forming a private organization to supplant the due processes of the Law, eh. . . . We'll slap that like a fly when we ain't busy at something else. I—" He picked up another envelope, then slitted it open quickly. "Here's a letter from my brother's wife back in Virginia."

IT WAS his older brother, Floyd. Floyd had been cut out of the old man's will because he had insisted, after a course in an Eastern university, on being a "no-good namby-pamby writer fella" as his father, Nat Rank, had put it. Floyd had gone back to Virginia where the family had originally come from. Married a local girl there and grimly followed his career.

"Good Lord Almighty," Dana said gently. "Floyd's dead." He looked at the postmark on the envelope. "Died over three weeks ago. Damn this mail service."

"That's too bad," said Will Keene automatically. He was used to mouthing the things Dana expected to hear.

"Killed when a horse ran away with him. . . . Poor Floyd, he always was afeared of horses. . . . " He read more of the letter from his sister-in-law. "She doesn't want any money. He left insurance." He picked up his drink as some of the bigger citizens in the town came in to congratulate him for having outshot Selvin. He knew their breed; they always kowtowed to power.

"Got business to handle, gents." He stalked through them, outside turned toward the two-story dobie jailhouse. He walked with that unconscious grace that characterized every move of his body. Then he stopped.

Down at the hotel, a slim small girl in a russet riding skirt mounted the steps to the white gallery of the hotel. Her walnut hair, loosened from her ride, had come down to trail in rich waves about her shoulders.

"Pretty as a spotted pony. Who is she, Will?"

"The new schoolmarm."

"Yeah?. . . . Look at the way she carries that snub nose up high. That filly's got spirit. She—" Remembering he was an engaged man, he turned in at the jail. Keene followed him absently.

A strange thought had entered the latter's none-too-agile mind. Just a realization. It was that with Floyd Rank dead, Dana had no living relative, no heir, save Will Keane. That was, until he married Lucinda Hemley. If anything happened to Dana before that. . . .

CHAPTER III

"CAME TO see that danged rustler, John Hawes, Mumford," Rank threw offhandedly at the sheriff in the jail office.

Mumford was a large raw-boned man with an egg-shaped head. He was tough with a pistol, lacked any imagination; he simply asked to be shown evidence, then hit a man's trail. He said sure and got his hoop of keys and led them to the second floor.

"We don't want to interfere with your business, sheriff," Rank dismissed him when they stood before Hawes' cell. John Hawes sat up yawning on his rumpled bunk as Mumford clumped off obediently. Rank beckoned.

Hawes was a lean pole of a man in his thirties. He had piercing black eyes that licked with deep dark fire. He measured his enemy, finally rose and came over to stand opposite Rank at the barred front. He was solemn as always, and he remained silent. He could keep his wrath penned till the right moment presented itself.

Rank put a match to one of his tailor-made quirlies. "Let's get down to business, Hawes. You know what I want."

"Sure, Rank. Every damn last thing you clap your eyes on—disregarding who might hold rightful possession." His voice dripped insult.

Rank ignored it. "About your ranch. We—"

"Sure. My ranch at a price that's plumb robbery. If you had had the nerve to stick a gun in my belly and take it—then I might uh had some respect for you. But now—"

Rank looked bored. "You can't win. Show sense."

Hawes interrupted, eyes biting into him. "Sure. You got me in here as a rustler. First you sicked that lobo and his pack, Black Pete Venzan—the polecat you use to do your dirtier work, onto me. And when I didn't quit then, you hung the rustler charge on me. You—" The spleen broke in him then and curses flowed in a steady stream.

Calmly Rank waited for the storm to pass.

"Rustler? Me?" Hawes finally said hoarsely. "Hell, Rank. . . .Since the day I came into this country, I never stole myself so much as a piece of table beef. Them two new hands in my bunkhouse—they were hired by you, Rank. I know that now. *They* took them Slash-R cows up into the hills and blotted out your brand with mine. You know that. And it's danged funny the way they was swallowed in thin air afterwards, wasn't it?"

Rank shrugged. "Got proof, Hawes?" There was no answer to that. "All right. Sign over your outfit to me at that figure—and you'll be snaked outa here some quiet night soon Charges'll be dropped too. Take it or go up to the Big House to serve a stretch as a rustler."

"Sure. I sign it over to you. Then if I ever git out alive, much less see my dinero—"

RANK bridled then, the gray eyes turning to bleak chunks of ice. He armed Keene away as if for fighting room without knowing it. "Ever hear of a time when Dana Rank—or any other Rank—didn't keep his word, Hawes?" Rank was a-quiver, hands wound around the thick iron bars that ran from ceiling to floor.

Hawes seized the moment. One of his long arms shot out and he snatched at the pearl-inlaid butt of Rank's nearer gun. But Keene's slicked-out Colts barrel chopped down on Hawes' hand, sending him to one knee, face ashen with pain.

Rank said, "You oughta know nobody wins against me."

All the fight was gone from dispirited Hawes then. He nodded, said all right. But his brother-in-law over at Musalla was a part owner. He'd have to sign the papers too. Rank nodded. His lawyer would draw them up. Then Hawes could send them to his brother-in-law.

"When they come back signed, you go out. you got the word of Dana Rank on it. . . ." He started down the hall. "Say, what happened to your uncle, Sam Hawes?"

"What's it to you, Rank? Or are you hungry for them gold teeth in his mouth?"

Chuckling, Rank trotted down the stairs. "Let's go over to the hotel, Will, and toss down a mess of fancy grub. . . .Well, fancy for this pueblo, anyway. When I get up to the city, I'll get me some real vittles."

"You didn't say anything about going to the city, Dana," said Will Keene when they got outside.

"Leaving on that seven o'clock stage this evening. Lucinda and I have moved our marriage up to next week. Got to get to the city to get

me some real duds for the wedding. And I want to pick her up a slick gift, too. Some jewelry, I reckon. Though wasting dinero on something like that that don't bring in nothing seems sorta crazy. Still...."

"Well, I wasn't expecting to leave town so sudden but—"

"You ain't."

Keene swallowed with surprise as they entered the wide-flung hotel. "You—you ain't going alone, Dana?"

"I was weaned quite a spell back, Will. Sure."

AFTER they finished eating, Keene settled to the task again. Dana shouldn't risk travelling alone, he said. Men were desperate in the Valley, backed to the wall, ready to sacrifice their own hides to put lead into him. Here in the Valley he had the backing of his powerful gun spread.

Rank cut him short. "I can take care of myself."

"I know, Dana; you can sling a gun with the best. But still—now if I was along just in case and—"

Rank's eyes narrowed. "Get this, Will. Some men were born to rule. Me, I'm one of that kind. Other men buckle before them. Shucks, man, if I was wiped out tomorrow—stripped of everything I got—thrown out into the brush with nobody knowing *who* I was—I'd be top dog in just a matter of time, . . .Now don't let that steak get cold."

He left on the seven o'clock stage, alone. Will Keene saw him off without again bringing up the subject of accompanying him. Of course, travelling, just he and Dana alone and none of the gun-pack around, there would have been many an opportunity. But Keene gave up the idea. Something would probably have blocked his rough plan anyway.

"I'll be back in five-six days, Will," Dana Rank called as he boarded the stage.

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS the fourth day. The Claybank stage was dropping down into Gunshot Valley, swinging toward the crossing of Thunderhead River under a moon like a ripe pumpkin. There was just one other passenger, a horse trader who snored steadily in the other corner of the seat. Dana Rank sat back in his corner, smiled in the dark and drew on one of those imported cigars he had gotten in the city. Actually, he didn't like cigars. But he thought they made him look more important. And he had a position to maintain now in Gunshot; he was a big man.

"Bigger than even my dad dreamed. . ." That got him thinking of his dad, Nat Rank. Dana had never known the mother who had died in childbirth. There was that one thing his father had drilled into him since he could remember. Land.

"Land, land, you can't ever git too much of it, son," Nat used to say again and again.

"Well, I got it," Dana said half aloud. The stage was going down the shale slope to Thunderhead River, brake shoes scraping. They hit the stream, water flashing up past the windows from the wheels as the coach strained and heaved over the rocky bottom. It toiled up the steep bank at the other side.

It was then the two masked breeds bolted out from the brush on that bank. They were a couple of two-bits, saddles tramps, hopped up on marijuana cigarets, eager for some quick dinero. They had no idea the great Dana Rank was aboard that stage. There was a shout, then a shot that vented the mule-skinner's hat. The second one just kept working that trigger and one of his slugs caught the guard in the neck. The man slid over the forward wheel like a sack and vanished into the stream. The skinner, sawing on the reins with one hand, went for his hip gun with the other. One of the crazed breeds spurred out and shot him in the body.

Rank had a door open and was on the step, a Colts in his hand. But at that moment, one horse of the lead team was wounded and turned and bolted downstream, dragging the rest and the coach half around. The current did the rest. Dana flung himself clear of the careening coach, landing in chest-high water. But a

small trunk skidded from the rooftop baggage rack and hit him over the side of the head. In another moment, his unconscious body was drifting with the stream. The crazed breeds emptied their guns at it.

"WILL! Will. . . ." he heard somebody calling feebly. "Will, you lopeared polecat, just when I need you—" Then he felt the rain beating into his mouth and knew it was he who was shouting. He propped himself up, blinking in the blackness. Finally he saw he was lying across a sand spit of the river. His next reaction was to slap down for his gun scabbards. Panic gripped him when he discovered them empty.

When he moved more, it felt as if a big nail was being hooked into his ribs. Pain brought back recollection of what had happened. So some enemies had tried to get him on the stage, eh. . . .Anger gave him strength and he dragged himself in to the bank. He'd get back to the Valley and deal with those— Then he was screaming as the wound in his side seemed to gouge deeper, and he realized his right leg felt like a clumsy, strange thing that didn't belong to his body. It was swelling badly too.

He fought down panic. He had to get help. That was the first thing. He was the great Rank of the Slash-R. He wasn't going to die, of course. Using a fallen bough as a makeshift crutch, he started downstream. Time became a fluid endless thing after that. The wind buffeted him and low-hung foliage switched at his face like something alive. But he kept walking, kept walking. The back of his skull hammered with every effort.

Once he halted to tie a strip of his shirt over his leg wound and placed a wad to stem the blood flow from his side. Sometimes it was hard for him to remember. Later he realized he had wandered off from the river. And when the first cottony gray of dawn came he stumbled on a faint cart track that wandered through low moundlike hills. He heard himself talking to himself another time. Trying to steel his mind, he guessed he was in that barren section off to the southwest of Gunshot Valley known as the Lost Hills. They said a man could be in there a week without coming upon another human.

As the first sun rays pierced the haze, he saw a tumbledown, soddy and collapsed just inside the doorway. . . .

Sunlight streamed into his face when next he opened his eyes. His clothes had dried but his sore aching body shook with the ague. He lifted his head and paid for it with a heavy cough that wracked his chest.

An elongated shadow moved on the dirt beside him. He realized it was cast by the figure of a man in the doorway. A second figure joined the first. Behind them stood a couple of ponies.

"He's awake now. It's him all right—Dana Rank." And the man began to curse in a sharp monotonous voice.

It was familiar to Rank. He pawed at his eyes to ungum them. Then he recognized both men. The tall one, built like a fence-post, was Sam Hawes, uncle of the John Hawes down in the jailhouse on the false charge of being a rustler. The shorter one, barely more than a younker, was Maury Lewes, wild, hot-blooded son of Cass Lewes, former owner of the Running-L outfit. And Dana Rank knew how he had driven out Cass Lewes by those range-pirate methods of his.

"Howdy, Rank! Some snakes die hard, don't they?" ground out Sam Hawes, lips peeling back so his gold teeth showed.

Dana Rank never thought of pleading for mercy. He knew, though, that he was practically shaking hands with death. . . .

CHAPTER V

RANK HUSKED out, "This time I've got no choice about picking my company, I reckon." He even tried to cock a supercilious eyebrow. It would be any instant now. One of them would simply haul out a pistol and let him have it smack between the eyes. Nobody could blame them. Not that anybody

would get the chance; out in this forsaken hunk of creation nobody would ever know anything about it. They had every reason to hate him to the bone. He had broken Lewes' father and Sam Hawes' nephew. This was their chance.

The Lewes button began swearing in that dull tone again. His hands went toward the holsters slung low and thonged-down on his square-cut body. But instead of drawing he tamped the weapons deeper into the holsters with the heels of his hands. Then he was jostled sideward as Sam Hawes took a couple of short, jerky steps. Hawes' breath came hard and his eyes were squeezed up and baleful. He grabbed a gun butt.

"Still think you're top dog of all of Creation, huh, Rank?" he said, words driven out jerkily by the emotion churning inside him. "By grab, maybe you're teched in the head then! But they's even more excuse for putting a *mad* dog outa its misery. Now, by Gawd—"

Gun steel made a snaky sound as it slithered from the well-oiled leather of the holster. His eyes were locked on Rank's forehead where he meant to bury the bullet. There was a curt cry from Maury Lewes. And he leaped forward to grab and lock skinny Sam Hawes' arm.

"You can't do it, Sam! You can't do it! You hear?"

Hawes practically hissed in his face. "What the hell do you mean, I can't? In Gawd's name, I'd do it if a posse was a-waiting for me with a lynch rope strung up behind the next hill. I can't do it, huh? Watch me!"

The two struggled as Dana Rank lay helpless and watched with burning eyes. Then Hawes slapped the kid a light blow over the forehead, bringing blood and sending him staggering away. He aimed at Rank again.

"Buy the devil a drink for me, Rank. Adios, you—"

Dana raged silently. Fear of death itself had not as yet entered his mind. If he could only stand to strike a blow!

Listening, Hawes turned to look for Maury, saw him stretched out on the ground. He ran over to drop on a knee beside him and the slick kid snaked an arm around his neck. In a welter of dust, they thrashed and twisted. Then they rolled apart and hit their feet together.

"We can't kill him!" Maury yelled.

Sam Hawes had lost his gun in the scuffle. But he reached up behind his neck and slicked a knife from a scabbard under his shirt.

"Forgot what he done to your pop, eh, you chicken-livered fool! All right. But stand back and let me finish him and—"

WITHOUT drawing his own guns, Maury walked at Sam. Sam warned him, swore to carve him as he backed away. Maury shook his head.

"No, Sam, no. We can't do it. We're men—not backstabbers and drygulchers. Killing him now would be the same thing.

"You damned traitor, Maury!" bawled Sam.

"Like hell I am. Why the hell do you think I was cursing so when we first saw him a-laying there? If I could uh paid him for what he did to my pop, do you think I'd uh been so blamed mad? I'd be a-yelling with joy, Sam."

Sam Hawes' grizzled brows drew down as he lowered the knife. "What?"

"Sure, Sam. We ain't animals. If we'd uh cornered that damn Rank when he was on his two feet and armed—"

"Wait up! If *we'd* uh stood in the way of that greedy sidewinder, he'd have us smoked out like so many coyotes. He wouldn't care was we hurt or helpless or—"

"Sure, I know, Sam. *He* would. But we ain't like him. We—well, we're decent, God-fearing gents. We don't have to hire nobody to do our shooting for us."

"If I can't settle my score personal with a pelican, well then—"

"That's right, Sam. And we don't spill blood an'—an' wreck men's lives 'cause they got something we crave. We don't jail 'em on false charges.

We ain't like Rank. . . .That's why we can't cash his chips now."

Sam Hawes nodded and put away the knife. "What do we do? I can't go into no town, Maury."

"He's got to git fixed up or he dies anyway. An there's that old Injun up by Skeleton Creek. . . ."

RANK vaguely remembered being toted out and propped in the saddle of a pony. Then there was nothing. There were hazy bits of dresses in which he floated. The veil thinned once, enough for him to see he was in a cabin on the thread of water that was Skeleton Creek. The coffin-faced Indian was giving him some herb tea, admitting he had been there several days, and that the slug was out of his leg. He tried to talk to Maury, to promise him a fat reward. Maury's words had stung back at him.

"Rank, I don't like money with blood on it."

Then there came a time when he woke ravenously hungry, and the Indian fed him antelope steak. He woke later and ate more and sucked a cigarette lustily. The Indian only shrugged when he asked where the other two were. Almost feeling his natural vitality flow back into him, Dana Rank sat up in the cot and watched the westering sun through the window and did some stiff thinking.

He thought of what Maury had said when he argued with Sam Hawes about killing him, Rank. And then Dana thought of his own life; it was ugly to face. He looked at the acts of that life in a different light now, in the light of that button's words. He reviewed his ruthless rush to power in the Valley. How he had grabbed for land and broken men loathe to part with it. Broken their lives, too. Darkness came and even in it he pinched his eyes shut against the ugliness of the visions of the past. He had driven men to the devil.

Like this Sam Hawes now. The stories had it that, since his nephew John lost his place, he had gone bad. Been hanging up in the hills at the edge of the valley, slipping into a settlement to hold up a store for a few dollars. And there was that poor devil of a Selvin. Dana Rank swayed to his feet and groaned an oath. For the first time he realized how helpless those little men had been against him and his money and the power it could purchase.

He began to dress. He was going back and there would be changes in the Valley. Big changes.

Hoofbeats came down the night as Dana buttoned his pants over a shirt. His wounded leg was stiff and sore but he managed to hobble to the front room in time to see the trio of riders dropping off out front.

"You say Rank's here, eh?" one said to the Indian. Then, brushing him aside, he strode toward the cabin. Will Keene, Rank's foreman.

"Howdy, Will?" Rank called.

Keene hauled a hogleg, peering in. "Dana! You. . . .Anybody else around? Nope? Good. Say, we thought you was drownded in the stage holdup." He sounded almost disappointed. He entered and they faced each other.

"Dang near died," Rank said. If Maury Lewes, Cass' son, and Sam Hawes, hadn't found me I guess I'd be buzzard fodder now."

"Probably hid you here an' figured to pick up a fat reward, Dana. We'll soften 'em up with a gun-whipping when they come by and—"

"Like hell! Things are going to change in the Valley."

Keene stood swinging his gun by the trigger guard, eyes lidding. "Is—that—so?"

CHAPTER VI

RANK SENSED the rebellion in Will Keene. The latter radiated truculence. As the days passed, his hopes had climbed. Perhaps they'd never find the boss. Or find him dead. Then he, the only relative left. . . .

Dana's gray eyes slanted over Keene's shoulder to check on the pair with him. Two of his gun spread. One, Big Ollie, a shambling brute. The other was a trigger slammer named Georgia.

Keene muttered, "Well, we came to bring you back."

"We'll wait till those two, Sam

Hawes and the boy, return. They're coming back to Union Hill with me and—"

Keene smelled something. "They's a five hundred reward out for that Sam Hawes. Town of Elcor put it on him." He was speaking loudly as if so the others out in front could hear. "The boys sorta thought—"

"I'm boss. I give the orders." Rank was getting mad. "They come back, I'll square things for Sam. I got a heap of things to square."

Keene scowled. He got it, all right. His eyes flicked over Dana Rank's empty holster. "Meaning?"

"Well, for one thing," Rank wanted to cram it down the sullen man's throat, "the Slash-R is kicking the trigger-slammers off the pay roll. And—and no more land-grabbing. The Valley is big enough for all of us."

Save for the chirp of crickets in the grass outside, it was very still. Keene's teeth ground behind tight-pressed lips. It was like a dream breaking off for him. No chance of him becoming master of the Slash-R. And on top of that, Dana was going to pull in his horns and—"

"Lucinda all right? She didn't worry too much, I hope."

That was the spark to the tinder. Keene had dreamt dreams about Lucinda too. Now, all that was exploded. Something snapped in Keene. Some half-understood compulsion began to drive him. He said:

"Got a nasty crack over the head, didn't you, Dana? Sure, I thought so. We'll take you right home."

"I got to get John Hawes out of jail." Dana was concentrating on how he meant to make amends.

"No." Keene spoke softly as if addressing a recalcitrant child. "Out to the ranch. And after a spell of quiet your mind—"

Rank roared an oath. "My mind? Hell, I know what I—"

"Don't make it hard for me, Dana. If you git violent—"

RANK lost his head. "Keene, you're fired here and now. And get the devil outa my way." He limped for the door. At the last instant he saw Keene's barrel descending in the dimness. Dana broke the blow somewhat. But there was the grind of smashed cartilage and bone. A terrible numbness in the center of his face. But Rank was a fighter to the bone. He lashed with his right and Keene tipped sideward over a chair.

Clumsy on his hurt leg, Rank made it out the door somehow. He knew he was a man fleeing for his life, knew Keene would kill if he had to now that he was committed. Keene yelled from inside and Big Ollie closed in. But Rank managed a kick that caught him in the belly, then was lurching around him and heading for the ponies. He dragged himself into the saddle of the bay of the other gunmen stood hesitant. Blood spurting from his nose, sick with the blinding pain, Rank threw the gut-hooks to the horse. He bolted down the path and turned along the faint track southward.

Behind, Keene piled out the door. Told Ollie to stick with the Injun. He shouted at Georgia and they hit saddle leather together. Keene seized the bridle of Georgia's horse.

"Get this!. . .Rank, he's gone hog-wild or something. You heard him. If he had his way, you'd be outa a job. If—if he should die now, I'd own the Slash-R. And you'd be my seguendo. *Sabe?*"

Georgia tongued thin lips. "Don't you mean partnuh?"

"Partner, then! Let's git after him!"

Ahead, Dana Rank had no idea where he was heading. Pain from the smashed nose spattered like sharp barbs through his head. He could hardly see. His weak body lurched like—a sack with the movement of the galloping bay. He just rode. That proved his undoing.

The faint track wound downward, meandering between the low mounds of hills. In the rear, Keene saw that Rank was following the trail. Will Keene knew how it looped a half mile ahead; he remembered that in coming up it. He yelled to Georgia behind him and cut off up a slope to the right. It would be a short cut.

SOMEHOW, as he came out of the loop half a mile on, the half-crippled, gunless Rank sighted them just before they bolted out from a small stand of jack-pine. It saved his hide for the moment as he swung the bay. Gunshots punctured the serenity of the moonlight. Lead whistled close by Rank as he drove the mare up into the brush. The animal made a spasmodic leap and lurched. He jerked its head up. The bay recovered but he knew she was hit, and they were tearing after him. Rank cursed the bright moonlight that bathed him so revealingly.

He came out onto a flat stretch dotted with scrawny and dead trees. Grimly he raked the straining weakening mare. If there were only some cover, a chance to hide. He knew now it was a matter of little more than minutes. And he couldn't forget what he had seen in Will Keene's flat-set eyes. Once he glanced over his shoulder and could see them closing behind him. He veered the mare a little more westward as Georgia opened fire, hoping to drop his horse. The flat began to slant downward gently.

Inside of a mile, it happened. His wounded leg throbbed agonizingly. Every movement of the saddle he sat seemed to buffet his whole frame. His left eye had swollen closed from the blow on the nose so he could see but little. A slug geysered up dust just beside the slowing mare. A ribbon of cloud smeared the face of the lopsided moon, dimming its glow for some seconds. Horse and rider went plunging into a line of brush running at right angles to their course. Too late Dana Rank saw the lip of the bluff ahead. He sawed on the reins. But the mare was too far gone to stop. She stumbled and lunged ahead. Its forelegs flailed out into space.

Desperation lent Rank strength as he flung clear of the saddle. Twisting, he grabbed at the edge of the declivity—and missed as brush uprooted and tore free. He dropped, face downward and body in a horizontal position. Almost two hundred feet below was the bottom of the narrow gash that cut through the Lost Hills. Rank fell twenty feet and only half saw the gnarled tree growing out from a rift in the stone side. It caught him full in the midsection and he lay dangling across it for half a minute with the wind driven out of him. Then he worked himself hurriedly into the base of the trunk against the wall as he caught the thud of his pursuers above. He was still stunned by the miracle of being alive.

"MUH Gawd! He went over the edge. I think I see his hoss down there on the rocks." It was the voice of Georgia, soft with awe.

Will Keene's voice came. "Now, I'm boss of the Slash-R."

Rank tilted his hatless head upward, wondering how long before they'd discover him and drill him like a fish in the proverbial barrel. But he couldn't see them and he was out of sight himself. The rock wall shouldered out in a knob just above to hide him.

"Mebbe he's smashed up but alive down there," said Georgia, voice still unsteady.

"You locoed? Ya think mebbe Dana sprouted wings, huh? Nothing could drop that far and live."

"But—well—mebbe we oughta work down to the bottom and see."

"You fool, there ain't no way of getting down into Coyote Cut less'n you ride up more'n ten miles. Then we'd have to pick our way back down along the bottom. He'll be buzzard bait an hour after sun-up, Georgia. Nobody'll ever be able to find him. . . Sabe? Nobody. And—we—never—saw—him, Georgia. Sabe?"

"Sure. You're boss—and I'm your pardnuh. . . ."

There was a pause. Then Keene said, "Uh huh, that's right. . . .Say, is that spot him down there? See? Over to the right. Look where I'm pointing, Georgia. . . ." Brush rustled as Georgia moved to look. There was the whiplash of a gun report. A moment later, the body of Georgia, drilled between the shoulder blades, went hurtling boots over ears past where Dana Rank crouched.

Again Will Keene's voice came. "Now to go back and take care of Big Ollie and that Injun. Then there'll be nobody to say I ever found Dana." He spat down into the cut. "After that, I better ride into Elcor and see if I can find that Sam Hawes and the Lewes button. If I can take care of them, they'll be nobody who saw Dana alive. . . .And I've got the Slash-R."

After some moments, he moved away from the edge of Coyote Cut. There was the creak of saddle leather. Two ponies moved off at a hand lope. Dana Rank shifted his position gingerly. He was officially dead.

CHAPTER VII

MAURY LEWES slipped through the stand of cottonwoods a little closer to Elcor at the edge of the Lost Hills country. It was a drab town of paint-peeling, boxlike structures strung along a main street that a low bluff scowled down upon. Maury's eyes were bleak with intermixed grief and anger. And lines of determination bracketed his taut-lipped mouth. Early this morning Sam Hawes had been recognized, wounded and captured here on the outskirts of the town. Maury had done his best to side Sam, but Lewes' gun had gone empty and he had had to light out. Now the nervy little hairpin was trying to slip back in and snake Sam out of that jail. Maury had left his cayuse deeper back in the cottonwoods. He worked ahead a few more yards, narrowed eyes scanning the somnolent town.

'Hey, Maury!" It was Dana Rank, battered face pushed up from behind a stump. The button whipped around, dropping into a crouched position and spiking his Colts up to cover Rank. He didn't seem to recognize him. "It's me, Rank, Dana Rank, Maury."

Maury peered, took a couple of steps closer. "Rank?"

Dana Rank put it down to the kid's surprise to find him there instead of back in the hills. He was still surprised himself, surprised at being alive. After Keene had left, Rank had nerved himself to the arduous task of scaling the twenty feet of the cut side to the top. It had been a doubly tough job in his condition. Twice he thought he could get no further. Once he almost went plunging to the bottom far below. But he finally dragged himself over the lip and then started the trek toward Elcor. Luck had taken a hand then. Just before sun-up, he had picked up a ride on a cart with a breed coming over from the range in Gunshot Valley. The breed had halted at the cabin of a friend a few miles down the trail. Rank had bought some grub—cold gray coffee and a piece of jerked beef and some stale Dutch oven bread—and headed on to the edge of Elcor afoot.

But he remembered that Keene planned to slope into Elcor too. Bedraggled, played out, recalling he was gunless, Dana Rank had skulked in off the trail like a fugitive. He wanted a good looksee first. If Will Keene were there, it would be dangerous. Keene had committed himself beyond recall. If Keene saw him, Dana Rank realized, Keene would shoot on sight and shoot to kill.

Now, Maury had happened along.

"THEY got Sam Hawes," Maury said after a long moment, still studying Rank as if not quite certain. But he could see the bandage inside the Slash-R owner's cut-open trouser leg. And there was that lump on the back of his head. He started to tell Rank about it, savagely, as if blaming him and still holding the gun on him.

"Wait! Don't go in there, Maury," Rank interrupted huskily as he savvied the button's design. "Will Keene, my seguendo, is a-hunting for you and Sam. He'll kill you! He tried to kill me and—"

Stocky Maury interrupted with a low harsh laugh. "Your foreman tried to kill you? What's the game, Rank? Dealing 'em off the bottom again, huh?"

Rank rose to his full height in his torn stained clothes, rubbing his beard-stubbled face. "Look, Maury,

don't go in! Keene's gone kill-crazy. He—"

The button spat into the grass, suspicion sticking out all over him. "Why don't you want me to go inta the town, huh? Why?" He started to back toward the main street and away from the haggard Rank who'd clutched at a tree trunk to steady himself. "Don't try to stop me—or I'll have a good excuse to drill you even if you are gunless," he warned.

Rank's head was throbbing terribly. For moments, things would blur and fade before his eyes. It was difficult to follow a line of thought in his mind. Again he opened his eyes and saw the yellow-thatched Maury moving quickly up a path that would bring him in behind the buildings along one side of the road.

RANK moved after him. He had done enough to Cass Lewes. He couldn't let Cass' son, Maury, get cut down without raising a hand. Squinting against the sun glare, he worked along. In the rank grass beside a shed back of a boarded-up place at the end of the street lay a warped-brimmed discarded sombrero. It was a size too small and almost shapeless. But Dana Rank pulled it on; at least it would shield his pulsing head against the impact of the sun. It was a far cry from the gear he was accustomed to wear.

He tried to increase his pace as he saw the button scuttle around a refuse heap behind a whisky mill several places ahead. Rank went pushing doggedly along, not quite knowing what he meant to do. Once he called to Maury but his voice was weak and so hoarse it lacked carrying power. A yellow-spotted dog emerged from a doorway and barked at him. Then he realized he was up where he had last seen Maury. But the younker was no longer in sight. Recalling vaguely that the jailhouse in Elcor was on the other side of the road, he turned down alongside a store. When he came to the head of the alley and took a stealthy look, he saw Maury—saw too the trap closing around him.

For the kid who was Sam Hawes' pard had been spotted. Maury was up the planked sidewalk to the right, diagonally across from the low dobie building that was the jail. Rank guessed his plan. He hoped to get into the town marshal's office in the front of it, jump whoever was there, then make them release Sam Hawes. But Maury had been recognized. Two men were coming down the side of the street toward where Rank crouched, closing in behind the kid. Across the road, a half-pint gent with a lawman's star on his vest stepped quickly behind a tree as Maury shot a backward glance.

Maury stepped around a hitchrack to move across the road. Two more men edged out the doorway of the General Store the hitchrack fronted. There was a low whistle. From his vantage point, Rank could see the watching man shift behind the barred-front window of the jail. The pair trailing Maury passed the alley where Rank crouched. He knew he had to do something.

A fat bald man moved along some yards behind the last pair. He wore a single Colts but his hand wasn't near it. He wasn't going to draw chips; he just wanted to see the fun. He paused a couple of feet from the hidden Rank. The latter reached down amongst the weeds. His hand wrapped around a small stick. It was a gamble, but he knew all eyes along the road would be riveted on Maury Lewes. Straightening, he leaned forward and jabbed the stick into the back of the spectator.

"Freeze—and stay in one piece, mister!" Dana Rank ordered low-voiced. "Just fold your arms on your chest and don't make a yip!" He could feel the man trembling against the stick that felt like a gun. A lone bead of sweat ran down the side of his face. Then he obeyed, crossing his arms on his chest.

In a split second, Rank had ripped the gun from the gent's holster, grabbed him by the back of his collar and jerked him quickly into the alley. As the bald hombre stumbled backward, Rank gave him a glancing blow alongside the head with the gun barrel. It was enough to render him helpless for a few minutes. He

stepped out from the alley as the first shout came.

Maury was going up the steps of the little porch tacked onto the front of the jail. He wheeled, grabbing out his hogleg.

"You're ringed in!" bawled the town marshal. "Surrender and git shed of the hardware or—"

YOUNG Maury Lewes was a fighter to the core, and what had been done to his father had made him as reckless as a bobcat. He wasn't being taken alive. Gun cocked, he leaped down the steps. And a shot from one of the men in the barroom doorway plunked into the jail wall beside him, cutting off the marshal's voice. Maury answered the shot in a split second. Men rushed at him from three directions.

Dana Rank saved Maury's life in that moment. Somehow the feel of gun steel against the palm of his hand had steadied him. He saw the jailor inside push a gun barrel through the window bars and draw bead on the kid's back. Rank fired twice. His first shot chunked dobie from the top of the window. His second clanged off one of the bars and seared the jailor inside across the forearm. That put him out of the picture. Rank ran down the planks toward the center of the melee.

That Maury was a fighting fool. He had put a slug in the leg of a man running down the road from the other direction at him. He had made the town marshal drop for cover behind a watering trough. But a bullet nicked him along the side of the scalp as he dodged about in the middle of the road. He swayed. But Dana Rank was firing again.

He blasted at the pair that had passed him when he stood in the alley, nicked one of them in the shooting arm. He stumbled onto the porch of a house. The other leaped into a ranch wagon in the gutter and dropped flat. It gave Maury an avenue of flight in that direction. He darted to that side of the road, went in amid ponies at a hitchrail, came out under it and made it into an empty hay and feed store. Men closed on the point. But Dana Rank jumped behind a tree. He sent a bullet droning past the town marshal to stop his charge.

"Stand back, damn you!" he cried. "I'm Dana Rank—Rank of the Slash-R! Keep back!" Maybe his voice was lost in the confusion. Anyway, they paid no heed.

A MAN hidden by the corner of the jail building began to pour lead into the hay and feed store. Others worked in from up the road. The marshal was yelling for a rush. From behind the tree, Rank could see into the place at an angle. Maury was making for a door in the rear of the place. Time became the important element then, time to let him make a get-away. Rank held his fire a few moments.

Then a man with a carbine, firing from the dim doorway of the blacksmith's barn down the road behind Rank, went to work on him. At that angle, the man could draw bead on him behind the tree. One bullet ripped a splinter from the plank wall near him. Another chunked bark just above his head.

"I'm Dana Rank, damn you!" called Rank again.

A fan of men moved in on the hay store. Rank leaped out into the weeds of the gutter and let go with his last slug. He vented the hat of the town marshal. The latter ran back into an alley and the charge wavered. The pelican with the carbine kicked up dust inches before Dana Rank. And only then did he sling his empty gun away and lift his hands to shoulder level.

"I give up." He figured things would be straightened out in a matter of minutes. Once they realized he was the great Dana Rank. . .

They moved in on him warily, Winrod the marshal cursing behind his two guns. A man ran up from the rear and almost knocked Rank over when he dug his gun into the cow king's backbone. Dana wheeled and cursed him, unused to being pushed around. The man hit him in the jaw with his free hand. Dana Rank sat down on his torn pants in the alkali.

"You'll pay for that, you son! I'm Dana Rank!"

That halted them in a small circle around him. They stared. Half-pint Winrod, the marshal, rubbed his long nose, then spat into the dust. "Dana Rank? You? Why you two-bit trail bum, git on your hind legs and stop the danged lying! We ain't fools!" He motioned and one of the others dragged sick Rank to his feet roughly.

Rank drew himself up and smoothed his dark hair with the old arrogant manner. It impressed them for the moment. He insisted he was Rank of the Slash-R. Told about the hold-up of the stage and how Sam Hawes and young Maury had found him in the Lost Hills. Winrod guffawed.

"And they didn't drill the daylights outa you? Hey, ya bum, don't ask us to believe that windy! Either of 'em would uh put a winda in your skull quick as a cow flipping its tail in fly time!"

"He ain't Rank. Rank's a good-looking devil even if he is a damn range pirate! I saw him just a coupla weeks ago. Rank's a dude."

Dana Rank tried to protest. But Winrod gave him a shove and told two of the men to take him to the jail. "Hey, what the hell happened to the little fella?"

As they walked him over to the jailhouse, Dana Rank knew a good warm feeling inside. For he caught the spatter of hoofs from the cottonwoods where Maury had left his pony. The button had gotten away.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN WINROD returned with the others, they were in an ugly temper. Maury had gotten away. One man had been wounded by him, and two had been nicked by Rank himself. One of them, the jailor, had his arm just bandaged up when Winrod started to question Dana Rank.

Rank stood up to look sneeringly down his nose at the local lawman. "Are those things on the side of your head ears or just something to keep your Stetson from falling over your eyes, Mister?" he snapped. "I told you who I was—Dana Rank of the Slash-R."

There was an angry mutter. The jailor grabbed up a quirt from the desk with his good left arm and slashed. It caught Rank across the arm and chest, ripping his silk shirt still more. He was thrown against the wall by a small shelf in the corner. On the shelf was a small cracked mirror. Dana Rank looked into it and thought he was facing a stranger.

The reflection in the glass was not that of a sleek arrogant hombre with a proud hawk nose over a slice of black mustache. To begin with, the face was so heavily beard-stubbled the mustache was lost. And the haughty hook of nose was no more. That gun barrel blow of Will Keene's had smashed the bridge of the nose and flattened it into a shapeless thing splayed out over his face. It changed him completely. One of his eyes was swollen and discolored from the same blow. There was a smear of dried blood on one cheek and on his chin. With his hair matted and his clothes dirt-spattered rags, he looked like nothing but some tinhorn after being thrown out of a few whisky mills.

For a moment, Rank's senses reeled. Then he had control of himself as he took in the situation. He became deadly calm as he faced Winrod again. "If I'm not Dana Rank, where is he?" he asked cannily.

Winrod pursed his mouth. "He ain't been seen. His foreman, Keene, was in town afore. He'd come down from the hills. And he didn't see hide nor hair of Dana Rank—or you."

Rank swore under his breath but kept his temper. It would do no good to try to convince these gents Keene had tried to murder him. Calmly he said, "The Lost Hills are a big place. But Sam Hawes saw me and recognized me. Ask him." He nodded toward the cells in the back.

Winrod shook his head. "We took Hawes this morning. He died of his wounds just before Keene rode in."

That was a blow to Rank, a heavy

one. He felt as if his insides had dropped out. Sam would have identified him. Then they'd both have been free and—

Winrod sleeved at his mouth as he stood frowning, then motioned to the jailor. "Put him back in the cell with that other gent, Ed. I'll send a rider up to Union Hill to see what Sheriff Mumford has to say." Something about Dana Rank's manner had sown doubt in the town marshal's mind. After all, if this prisoner *was* Rank—well, there would be hell to pay later.

DANA RANK was led into the back of the little jail-house. There were just two cells. There was a short, bull-chested prisoner in the one on the left. He stood lounging against one of the heavy bars of the front of the cell, chewing unconcernedly on a home-made toothpick. Rank was put in with him. The Slash-R owner, boss of the Gunshot, shuffled over to drop down on the single bunk and put his head in his hands.

"Take a brain pill. No grave is as deep as it seems." It was the cellmate pushing a fresh-rolled quirly in front of Rank's face. He held a lighted match and Rank drew deep.

It was a blow to Dana Rank's pride to be treated like an ordinary saddle tramp. He had taken it for granted that everything would be all right when he reached a town. Again he would be the all-powerful Rank of the Slash-R with men knuckling down in awe before him. As he jetted smoke from his sore nose he heard arguing voices from the front of the building.

"Holy hell, Winrod! Sam Hawes was outlawed for them holdups here. The younker, young Lewes, he was Hawes' pard. And now this buzzard sides Lewes. What more evidence do we need?"

"Sure," seconded another man. "We can have a jury together in ten minutes. And it won't take 'em half that time to reach a verdict. I—" A door closed on the voice.

A little later, a man brought a pot of java and a plate of greasy beans back to Rank. "Here you are, Mr. Boss?" he said mockingly, and added to the other prisoner, "Do you know you're sharing a cell with the great Dana Rank, cattle king of Gunshot, himself?"

The other stared at Rank till the man had gone back into the front. "Hey, you aren't Dana Rank, *the* Rank, are you?"

Rank scratched inside his sweat-and-blood-stained shirt; he had never felt so dirty in his life. He shrugged. "'Course not." He didn't feel like another argument. Nobody would believe him.

"By grab, you had me scared there for a moment." He chuckled. "I was headed into Gunshot Valley to bust a cap on that Dana Rank. I was raised with a natural dislike for sidewinders. My handle's Beaker, Andy Beaker. Reckon that calls for a drink." He began to yell at the front office.

RANK looked up from the beans he was gulping, frowning with the effort of sorting things out in his brain. Andy Beaker. . .the name had a familiar sound. Then he got the connection. Beaker was the Texas gun terror, cleaner-up of hell towns, whom the Tobys of the Sombrero-T had been importing to Gunshot Valley. And one of the last orders he, Rank, had given as he departed from Union Hill that last time, was that this Beaker should be grabbed when he came in. Well, he had been. It was one of those grim jests of Fate.

Rank swallowed the last of the acrid, reheated java. He would have booted a cookee off the Slash-R personally if he had served up coffee like that. Then he sat raking his matted hair slowly as he weighed his predicament. It was a race between himself and Will Keene. A race even though he, Dana Rank, sat pent up in a jail cell. It was a question of whether Winrod's rider got to Sheriff Mumford before Keene took over the Slash-R, made himself boss of the Valley, and proceeded to give orders.

The man who'd brought the grub returned with a quart of whisky that he passed through the bars after getting a bill from Andy Beaker. Beaker

promptly sloshed healthy shots into the two tin cups.

"Drink up, pard. You ain't no worse off than me. Hell, she's just a matter of time—maybe it'll be on a Wednesday or some rainy Saturday—till I'm a cottonwood apple," Beaker said gayly. "Wait'll word gits through to that Dana Rank that I'm here. His rider'll kill a horse returning with the hanging orders."

"That so?" Rank dumped down his drink. It sent fresh fire through his veins. The ache of his smashed nose ebbed somewhat. Beaker poured out more of the redeye.

"Say, that was a locoed trick of yours, trying to pass yourself off as that snake of a Rank yourself. Just locoed enough to work."

Rank nodded. "Been nice if it had, eh." He blinked as the raw liquor cleared the cobwebs from his head. The other cell had a front of bars like the one he was in. Therefore he could see into it fully. And he saw why he was sharing this one with Beaker. Three of the four iron bars in the small window of the other one had been torn from the dobie at the bottom in an escape attempt. Rank figured the man who'd done it had failed. The opening effected was too small for the body of a full-grown hombre.

Beaker was chuckling. "Sure would have been nice. You could uh pulled me outa here. Then I could've gone looking for Rank himself and put his light out. . . .They say he's no slouch with a smokewagon himself, though," he added. He walked across the cell on his short legs.

HE WAS a long-torsoed man with over-length arms. They contrasted with his sawed-off legs to make him look almost ludicrous when he moved. He had a plain face with tolerant eyes beneath a high, bulging brow. He was dressed in worn gray with a plain black necktie over a blue shirt. He might have been any hard-working small rancher who was considered a good loan risk by his local bank. When he turned at the other side of the cell, his eyes appraised Dana Rank carefully. But he didn't probe with questions.

"Git yourself outside that drink, fella. You need to loosen up some." He shook his head. "Funny thing about this business of me being here. The party that hired me couldn't offer me nothing like my usual price. Coming into Gunshot to buck this Rank is worth a fat bonus, and me, I was about set to quit this business. No matter who you are, somewhere there's a slug with your name on it waiting for you."

He paused to refill Rank's tin cup. "And some day," he went on, "that particular piece of lead is going to catch up with you. . . .Yep, I was due to hang up the hardware. Was going into partnership in a barroom with my brother-in-law. Then I got this letter from an outfit up here. The dinero wasn't much. It was the idea of getting a crack at this Dana Rank that brought me. They say he's one dirty heartless polecat who'd skin some poor devil alive and then peddle the hide just to git himself a few more acres of ground!"

"Is that so?" said Rank himself. "'Course, that's the way his enemies tell it. He must have some good in—" He felt sleepy.

"Not that skunk! And one thing he's forgotten. That is that it takes only six foot of ground to bury a man in, by Gawd!"

Rank nodded as he leaned back on the bunk. . . .

DARKNESS had come when Dana Rank awoke. Wan moonlight flowed in the window of the cell across the way. Rank could see Andy Beaker sitting over on the stool. Rank sat up and stretched slowly. He felt a heap stronger and steadier.

Beaker told him it was after midnight. "And I learned something. Heard 'em talking in the office. They's a story going around that that damn Dana Rank is missing. They think he's dead."

"Do tell," said Rank with bitter sarcasm. He realized how the odds were against him. It was about a two-day ride to Union Hill. Keene would have plenty of time to take

control if he worked swiftly. Once he had, and when word came in a jasper calling himself Rank was down in Elcor—Dana Rank didn't want to think about the rest.

They had another drink and Beaker rolled into the bunk. The hours seemed to drag. Propped on the stool, Rank dozed and was assaulted by spectres of his sins of the past. He tried to keep himself awake, to escape the dreams, with a quirly. Accustomed to tailor-made ones, his fingers clumsily fashioned a crooked tube of Durham that came apart after a few drags. He was heeling it out when he became aware of the sudden fading of the moonlight.

He lifted his eyes to the window of the opposite cell through which the glow had been coming. Something was in the window, working through the aperture left by the broken-out bars. Then he saw it was Maury Lewes. It seemed locoed, breaking into a cuartel. The other cell was locked. Maury couldn't help them any. His coming itself was incredible to Rank.

The button dropped to the floor inside the other cell and a pack rat scuttled off. He called over to Rank in a hoarse whisper as he took one gun from inside his shirt. Dana Rank drew himself up. The kid had learned of Sam Hawes' death, blamed it on him indirectly, and, locoed, had slipped in here to exact revenge. That seemed about the picture. Then Maury produced a second gun beside the one he had slung on his leg. He came over lightly to the front of the other cell.

"Well, wake up, jughead. I wanta pass these hoglegs over to you!"

"Wh-what?"

"Shucks, you followed me into town yesterday and saved my skin when they jumped me," Maury whispered impatiently. "I saw you. So I'm getting you out and—"

CHAPTER IX

ANDY BEAKER sat up on the bunk. Maury swung a gun in his direction. Something prompted Rank to say Beaker was all right. Perhaps it was the half-formed plan growing in his mind. "We can take him with us, eh?. . .But how are we going to get out, Maury?"

"Get these hoglegs—then call the jailor. Pretend like one of you is sick. Then jump him when he comes. Here!" He stretched an arm through the bars with the two extra Colts, Texas Patterson models. But he couldn't quite reach across the corridor separating the cells. He had to toss them.

Rank caught the first gun against his stomach. But the second caromed off a bar of the jail front and his clutching hand missed. Before it clattered to the floor, Andy Beaker scooped it in his hat as he hustled over. Maury said all right and retreated to a dark corner of the other cell.

Rank whispered to Beaker and went into action quickly. Dropping down on the floor he began to roll and writhe as if in the throes of agony. Andy Beaker banged on the cell front with a tin cup and hollered to beat all hell. When the jailor, his wounded arm in a sling, came clumping from the office up front, Dana Rank was already moaning.

"This pelican is dying," Beaker told the jailor. The latter sleepily muttered something about it saving them the price of a rope. But Beaker was quick-witted. "Hells bells, he's clean outa his head. Just jumped on me in the bunk and tried to choke me to death!"

The jailor cocked a suspicious eye; he was wary. He said all right, they'd handcuff him to the front bars of the cell. He pulled out manacles and pushed them through. Beaker grabbed the hand that held them and punched his gun muzzle between the bars. Despite his bad leg, Rank came off the floor fast and covered the stammering jailor with his weapon.

"Go ahead and yell—and see if we care," he snapped.

"Open up this cell, jughead," said Beaker.

"Lemme git my keys," whined the jailor. And Beaker released the man's left hand. That jailor had nerve. He jumped back across the hall to the

other cell. "Now, go ahead and drill me! And what good'll it do ya, huh? I drop dead here and you can't git the keys. And—" His eyes rolled up in his head. The hand that had been inching down to the holster froze.

"Now just open up this cell, Mister," said Maury, who had crept up behind him. "You two jaspers ain't so bright," he added to Rank and Andy Beaker.

THAT DID it. Quaking, the jailor scratched the key in the lock of Maury's cell. The latter stepped out, ripped the Colts from the man's holster, then made him let out Rank and Beaker. In a matter of moments, they had the jailor trussed up and gagged. Then they shoved him under the bunk in the cell and matter-of-factly sashayed out the front door onto the main street of the sleeping town. The daring Maury actually had left three ponies ground-anchored just behind the horse shed of the jail itself.

As Rank swung his leg over the saddle of one, he asked Maury in a whisper where he'd gotten the extra two ponies. The yellow-headed kid's eyes flashed in the night.

"Stole 'em, of course."

The accusing finger of guilt jabbed Dana Rank's conscience again. Maury added that he had plenty of shells and that the saddle bags were filled with grub. There was no need to ask him how he had managed that. Quietly they eased their ponies through the grass and into a little gully beyond the town. When they put a couple of miles behind them, they paused to listen for pursuit. There were no sounds of any. Rank turned his cayuse northward.

"Let's hit smack into Gunshot Valley. They'd never expect us to go that way."

Andy Beaker rubbed his nose, then nodded. "'S all right with me. I sloped in here to tackle Rank. But even if he's dead, I got a score to settle with Black Pete Venzan, Rank's catspaw. It was Venzan and his outfit that picked me over and turned me over to the John Laws. . . . Say, I don't know the handle of either you er your pal, mister."

Maury's eyes had been switching to Beaker and then to Dana Rank and back again. He hesitated, numbling something about busting the breeze. Beaker cleared his throat and spat into the grass.

"Dang it, I sure was craving to put lead inta that dirty coyote, Rank," he said. "Hope he ain't dead. I wanted to make that gent crawl. Crawl-l, by grab. And he would uh, you can bet. His kind are always yella-livered."

Maury saw Rank stiffen in his saddle, saw the old arrogance of the clan coming to the fore. Rank started, "I'm Dana—"

"Joe Dana, my saddle pard," said young Maury quickly. And then he introduced himself.

"Me, I'm Andy Beaker, gunman from Texas. Some gents claim I got a rep. Let's ride. . . ."

THE first day they hid in a little draw down near the end of the Valley where it petered out in a curving tail. At night, they moved again, shifting up nearer the heart of the valley to slip into a mesquite jungle with the dawn. The full significance of what had happened to him began to sink in to Dana Rank. The repercussion of it hit him full force. He itched to strike a blow, to do something about it.

"Keep yourself penned, Dana," advised Andy Beaker, not knowing what drove Dana Rank. "We're fresh outa a jail, and we're riding borrowed ponies in the bargain. Wait'll the trail cools off."

They saw a posse pass their hideout about two miles away. About noontime, another column of riders passed into an arroyo further down the valley. Studying them through Beaker's field glasses, Dana was fairly certain they were some of the gunhands from the Slash-R. Will Keene was staging a real manhunt for the man escaped from the Elcor jail who claimed to be Rank.

It was a little before sundown when they spotted the pair of horsemen coming through the pass on the west side of the valley. Young Maury

stripped off his gunbelt, slipped his gun inside his shirt, and rode out of his own pony to meet them. Dana and Beaker hid themselves down the trail at the point where the meeting would take place. Everything went off all right. Maury looked too young to be suspicious. When all three returned to the camp in the mesquite, Maury gravely told what he had learned without looking Dana Rank's way.

"Dana Rank is dead," he said the two riders had told him.

"Dammit to hell! I feel like I been robbed," was Andy Beaker's reaction. His fist jammed closed on the silver-nosed bullet, that was apparently a good luck piece, he had been flipping.

Maury went on, voice tight. "Rank's segundo, Keene, brought in the word. Keene was out searching for him. Up in the Lost Hills, he met an hombre who saw Rank's body in the bottom of Coyote Cut. Said he'd been shot dead by somebody who'd apparently held him up to rob him."

There was silence for a moment. Beaker finally said as how that probably meant the end of the power of the Slash-R in the Valley.

"No-o." Maury cut his eyes toward Dana in the duck. "No. Will Keene will be running things. Seems, accordin' to the story, he inherits it. There was no will and he's Rank's only living relative. He'll run things."

"And there'll be hell in the Valley," Dana Rank bit off then clamped up his mouth hard. Then he said no more. It was bitter as gall and wormwood, and Keene's scheme was almost foolproof. A party would go into Coyote Cut. They would find Georgia's body, picked clean to the skeleton bone by the buzzards and coyotes. It would be taken for his, Rank's corpse. And then—

BEAKER was on his feet, gun already snaked out. He'd caught a sound. It turned out to be a couple of gents afoot nosing down in the far end of the mesquite. Half a mile southward, in the open under the first risen stars, a posse sat their ponies. The trio of fugitives slipped out the upper end of the mesquite, led their ponies down a dry wash, and struck into the timbered slope of the west side of the valley.

That night they crossed the ridge out of Gunshot Valley. It was at Andy Beaker's insistence. Rank's battered physique was showing the strain of riding. His wounded right leg had stiffened up like a fence post. He bucked at the idea.

"You wanta collect the reward on yourself, huh?" Beaker asked him. "For your information, let me tell you they never give it to a man till after he's been hung." So they cut out of the Gunshot.

For a couple of days, they rested up at an abandoned line rider's cabin over on Antelope Mesa to the west, then moved into a little pueblo beyond Horsehead Butte. Dana had found a wad of bills, still stiff after drying from the river water, in a back pocket. It was a bitter reminder of his former life when money meant so little he shoved a bunch of it into any pocket that was handy. They stopped at a General Store and Dana bought himself a new rig, a plain hickory shirt, a black flat-crowned hat, and a pair of jeans. Then he invested in a pair of bone-handled Colts for himself and treated Beaker to a pair.

"Just about the same balance of the hoglegs I left over in Elcor," Beaker remarked as he thumbed that silver-nosed bullet into a chamber, then removed it before loading the smokepoles with regular shells.

"Who're you saving the fancy slug for?" Dana asked.

"Myself." Beaker grinned the half-sad little grin.

"What?" Maury gaped.

"Sure. Fortune teller told me once I'd only be killed by a silver slug. So I carry it. So long's I have it, nobody can kill me with it."

DOWN the line, Dana went into a barbershop. He had himself shaved. "Clean," he ordered. "No mustache, nothing." When the job was finished, his upper lip was bare of the sleek mustache of former days,

and his dudish long sideburns were gone. Cold-eyed, he studied himself in the mirror, fingering the flattened out nose now with no sign of the hawkish bridge. He didn't look like his old self at all. Maury stared and blinked when he stepped outside, garbed in the plain rig.

They went down to a barroom for a drink, but they were unable to buy one. The local Justice of Peace, a cackling wizened little man with a spike of white beard, was setting them up for everybody in the house. He was plenty orey-eyed, strutting around like a bantam rooster.

"Think nothing of it, amigos," he told them as he ordered the bar boss to refuse their dinero. "Performed a big marriage last night. Sorta a secret one. He-he. The groom was one of the biggest gents in this part of the country. Yep. An' he give me a hundred dollar fee. Just like that! Yep. Have another snort, gents!"

When they left there, Beaker called a council of war. "With Rank dead, I just got one mission. To bust a cap on that Black Pete Venzan who turned me over to the Law. . .What're our plans?"

Maury looked to Dana Rank. Dana said, "Rank might be dead, but the new boss of the Slash-R, Will Keene, he'll carry on the gun rule, only worse. Gunshot Valley's still gotta be cleaned up and scores settled."

"That's right," seconded Maury.

"Venzan'll be working for this Keene, the new boss, eh. . . .Mebbe the Tobys of the Sombrero outfit'll still need me then. Looks like we're sitting in on the same game, gents."

"Guess so, Beaker. It'll be rough riding."

"Is Joe Dana calling me a greenhorn?" Beaker chuckled around his stub of quirly. "But you two, you wasn't planning to buck the hull Slash-R alone, was you?"

Again Maury watched Dana Rank for his answer. Dana had it ready. "We can use more guns. There's one gent who'd walk through hellfire barefoot to get a crack at Rank's Slash-R—I mean, Keene's outfit. That's John Hawes. He's down in jail in Union now on a trumped-up rustling charge."

"Well?" said Maury.

"We get him out," said Dana. "And they'll be others." He was thinking of Gene Selvin who'd tried to drill him back in Union Hill. And there would be the small ranchers. It would be a tough fight, bucking the very outfit that he had so ruthlessly built to all its power. The shrill singing of the drunken Justice of Peace intruded itself on his black thoughts as they rode away.

CHAPTER X

TWO DAYS later, in the golden haze of evening, they sloped into Union Hill. The town was thronged, raucous and throbbing with a gala atmosphere. Slash-R cowhands were in evidence everywhere. Dana's mouth twisted when he first saw them swaggering along the wooden sidewalks, jostling ordinary citizens into the gutter as usual. One of them, well liquored up, stumbled almost under the hoof of the former boss' cayuse as they turned a corner. The man clutched at the reins to save himself, twisting around to look full up into Dana Rank's face.

The man was Tolly Harrison, a wiry jasper with a couple of missing front teeth. He'd been on the Slash-R pay roll for more than two years. Yet, between the rider he cursed thickly, this clean-shaven man with the flattened nose, and his one-time boss, he seemed to see no resemblance. Dana Rank himself leaned forward to cuff the jasper.

"Look out—he's a Slash-R hand!" warned the ever alert Maury, and Dana stopped his arm in time.

They went down to a little eating place at the tag end of a side street, a grimy, tired-looking place frequented only by the down-at-heel rag tag of the town. Maury left them to scout around and get the lowdown on conditions in the town. Dana protested, but Maury insisted nobody would give a second look to a younker like him. Beaker might be recognized by somebody who'd seen him down along the Rio, and there was

always the danger Dana would give himself away.

The two older men were sweating over their java when an hour passed. But Maury walked in a few moments later, cocky as a rooster. He had the information all right. Got it from the daughter of the livery barn boss, a girl he used to spark in the old days.

"John Hawes is still in jail, all right. Will Keene was in to visit him earlier today. Afterward Keene let drop as how he wanted to be generous and would drop the rustling charges against Hawes."

Dana swore softly. "That means that relative of Hawes' has sent word he'll sign the ownership deed and is sending it on. Hawes is going to buy his freedom by giving his outfit to the Slash-R! Will Keene being big-hearted—like hell!"

Andy Beaker cocked an eyebrow. "How come you know about that, Dana?"

Maury picked it up quickly. "Joe Dana here worked for Rank once. . . .Here's more news. Keene brought almost the whole outfit into town. He's here himself, at the hotel, of course. Seem like it's some kind of celebration. Every man on the pay roll got half a month's wages as a bonus. They're lapping up all the redeye in town."

"All right." Dana's mouth tightened; this was his dinero being flung around, actually. "We're interested in the jail."

"Sheriff Mumford rode out on the range. He's due back in sometime this evening. He's offered five hundred outa his own pocket for the man who killed—uh—Rank. And a deputy named Brane's in charge in the sheriff's absence. And—"

DANA held up a finger. "Brane's new to these parts. He came in about a month ago. A Montana man." He didn't add that this Brane had a prison record back in Montana, that he was a crack gunslinger with a merciless trigger finger. And that he himself, Dana Rank, had dictated his appointment as a deputy. Dana went on, "He won't know the badge packers over at Elcor."

"What does that make us?" inquired Beaker.

"This. I and Maury are going to be special deputies bringing up a prisoner from Elcor."

Beaker scratched his nose. "And who is the prisoner?"

"You. . . .You were recaptured. Marshal Winrod of Elcor sent you up here for safe keeping. Simple."

"Mebbe. What's the game?"

"To get inside the jail so we can release Hawes. And what better way to get in than to bring a prisoner. When we help take you upstairs to your cell, we jump that deputy."

Andy Beaker drummed the table for a moment with his left hand the top of whose middle finger had been shot off. "All right," he nodded.

"We'll need a pony for Johnny Hawes," Maury put in.

Dana patted the roll of bills in his pocket. "I'll handle that. . . .Sooner we move, the better. We want to work it before Mumford returns."

They were leaving the place when Beaker jumped back into the velvety shadows waxing after the sunset. A man across the narrow road passed on to turn in at a log-pole butcher store.

"That gent thought he recognized me," Beaker explained. "I used to know him down in Tres Pinons."

THEY decided to break up. It would be safer. Dana had to go to the main street to buy a pony at a livery barn. They decided Maury would take their three horses to the alley a little way down from the jail. There was a big tree across the way from the jail building. They arranged to meet in its shadows. Beaker could get to it by a round-about back route.

"Don't waste no time," cautioned Maury Lewes just as they parted. "We don't want Mumford to march in on the middle of the party."

Dana Rank cut down a lane and entered a livery barn by the back way. He picked out a rugged-legged little roan built for going in rough country, wasting little time in dickering over the price. As he glanced at the

bill of sale, he recalled the owner as a man heavily indebted to the bank. And Rank himself was—or had been—the biggest stock-holder in the bank. He wanted to laugh. He led the roan out onto a side road, preparing to mount for the ride up into the heart of the town as the darkness thickened. Then he froze.

Across the road was a shabby little house with a sign, "Dressmaker," in the cracked window. And coming down the steps of the place was Lucinda Hemley. It was a double-barrelled shock to Dana. The sight of her in the band of light from the doorway, lemon-yellow hair gleaming from beneath her bonnet. That and the realization of how little he had thought of her since the hold-up of the stage. A third realization hit him. He could regain everything, the Slash-R and all his former power. It seemed incredible he hadn't thought of it before. For his fiancee, Lucinda, could identify him. Of course!

She hesitated out in front of the house, face held high with the haunteur he had admired. Bowed slightly when a couple of passers-by greeted her. Then she turned to the left and moved along beneath the canopy of foliage. A few yards away, a couple of riders had reined up, talking. Rank checked the impulse to rush to her. It could be dangerous. In shock, she might make an outcry, and Keene's gunman would close in and— With his pony between her and himself, he walked along, paralleling her course and a little behind.

From the main road the general din grew louder and rougher. Will Keene's gun-pack was really whooping it up. Near the head of the road, Lucinda took a path that led over an open slope. It would bring her out a few yards from her home above the town, Dana realized. He couldn't wait. His impulsiveness made him call out in a low voice. Pausing, she looked back over the low-waving grass of the field. He closed in quickly, running with a limp before his horse.

"Lucinda!"

She started. He saw her dark eyes jump and bulge beyond any question. Then her face was an impersonal mask, frigid, guarded. "Who—who are you?"

"It's Dana—Dana Rank," he said huskily, standing over her. Something went cold in him as she backed away a step with a veiled grimace of dislike.

"I don't know you."

"Dana. It's me, Lucinda."

"You are either intoxicated—or crazy, man!"

He wanted to grab her and shake her, to break down the icy demeanor. He was quivering like a sick colt with the shock of her repulse of him. He was quivering like a sick colt with the shock of her repulse of him. But he kept himself tight-reined. "Look, I had an accident. My face has been changed. But, Lucinda, you must know me. You must! It's my one chance—my chance to escape being buried alive. You—"

"*I* am not accustomed to speak to strange men!"

"For the lovva Gawd, Lucinda. It's me—Dana, the man you are going to marry! I—"

She was backing up the path. "Dana Rank is dead! If you aren't a fool, you're an imposter." She was afraid. But it wasn't the fear of a woman being molested by a man; it was something else.

He followed her. "I'm Dana, I tell you, you silly wench! You must know my voice, by grab! Listen. Didn't I name that new-born filly out at the ranch after you? Called it Lucy, didn't I? Who else would know that?"

She made a little gesture, retreating steadily.

"Look. Look here." He put his two hands behind his back. "Which one is it in? Guess it and you get it!" It was a game they played when he used to bring her a gift. Habit tricked her—habit and the instinct of greed. The dark eyes darted after his disappearing hands hungrily as if to get some hint. Too late, she caught herself.

"You *do* know me, Lucinda!" he cried harshly.

"No—no, I—"

He took a quick stride, seized her

by the shoulders, jerked her to him, and brought his lips down savagely against hers. At first she struggled. He pressed down brutally. When he released her, she stood panting, ashen pale, dark eyes smoky with emotion as he had never seen her before. He had never kissed her like that before.

"Something the matter, Miss Lucinda?" Three men had stepped through the line of trees a little way over on the upper end of the main road. A moon had inched up over the northern horizon line and Dana and the girl stood revealed in its glow. Suddenly Lucinda caught up her skirt, turned, and fled. Dana stood, torn between fury and fervor, tasting that kiss over again, stunned with bewilderment. It had been a Judas kiss.

CHAPTER XI

THE TRIO came walking up to him. The short man with the paunch seemed familiar. The six-footer in the middle said, "What the hell goes on here, pilgrim? We don't like gents who pester our womenfolk in this town."

It was some seconds before Dana tore his eyes from the running girl to look at them. "Oh, go to hell," he said wearily as he picked up the bridle reins.

The six-footer edged forward belligerently. "Slash-R men don't take lip from no trail tramp, pilgrim. If you're asking for a gun-whupping, well-l, me an' my pards'd be delighted to accommodate—"

Something tore loose inside Dana Rank then. It was the reaction of having Lucinda refuse to recognize him. She had known him, he knew now. He spat out an ugly word and slammed the tall one flush in the teeth. The man lit on his pants six feet away in the grass and lay limp. The paunchy one had a gun half dragged. Dana slid out his Colts and cracked it backhand over the other's forehead. The paunchy one moaned and unhinged and crumpled in his tracks. Lusting for a showdown battle, hungry for the release of brute action, Dana whipped about to face the third one.

But he was already making tracks, running like crazy for the main road. As he got into the dimness of the trees, he began to holler like hell. Dana regained his senses then, remembered that date he had down at the jailhouse. He couldn't get embroiled in a gun ruckus. He hit the saddle leather, quit the path, and bolted into the gully beyond the side of the slope. He moved at a hand lope in a wide arc to re-enter the town at another point.

A hot pulsing darkness had come down like a curtain and Dana knew he was overdue when he came in the back end of the alley near the jail. Dependable little Maury had the three ponies ground-anchored in there all right. The kid and Beaker were boogry when Dana joined them, fearing something had happened.

"Met up with a woman I used to know," Dana said curtly. He felt Maury's eyes on him a moment and knew the kid knew whom he meant.

THE SHERIFF hadn't returned yet. Luck seemed to side them as an altercation took place up the road a bit where two cowhands were being ejected from a whisky mill. All attention was turned there as the three quickly crossed the street after lashing Beaker's hands behind him with a piece of rawhide. They marched boldly up the steps to the jail, Dana thudding the door heavily. The jailor opened up and Brane, a burly pin-headed man, stood behind the desk with fishlike eyes riveted on them. A gun lay beside his hand.

"We're special deputies from Elcor," announced Dana Rank loudly as they pushed Beaker in. "Got a prisoner here that Marshal Winrod sent along."

"Winrod?" said Brane stupidly.

Dana gave him the story. Said Winrod was sending this recaptured prisoner up to Union for safekeeping. Brane wanted to know what the charge was against the prisoner. Dana played dumb himself.

"I guess Sheriff Mumford would

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"I guess Sheriff Mumford would

understand about that. . . Mighty dry ride up here." He wiped his mouth as he stared at the bottle on the desk. Then he stiffened as the door behind swung open again. Two men came in; one was Bob Roberts, a gunhand from Dana's own Slash-R bunkhouse. The man with him asked if there was any trouble.

"Nothing," said Brane. "They got a prisoner here from Elcor I don't know anything about. . . Mr. Keene was in here before and said as how that hombre down in the Elcor jail who claimed he was Rank had killed a man since he escaped. Mr. Keene's offering a thousand dollar reward for him dead or alive—in memory of the dead Dana Rank himself. "If you had *him*, now. . . . "

Dana Rank felt as if an invisible net were tightening around him. Will Keene wasn't missing a single trick. The fury that was becoming a habit swirled inside him. But he pushed aside the personal angle; they had a job to get done.

"Well, we ain't got that one," he said sullenly. "And it looks like we might as well turn this jasper loose. We done our part."

That woke up Brane a little. He said he guessed they could throw him in a cell. "Take 'em upstairs," he told the jailor.

Going down the hall, as the jailor led the way with the lantern, Dana quickly knifed the rawhide around Andy Beaker's hands. Then he drew Beaker's Colts from beneath his shirt. They went up to the second floor.

"When he opens up a cell. . . start struggling as Maury pushes you in," Dana whispered. "If he gets a chance to yelp. . . . " He didn't need to say more.

IT WENT off as simply as spitting in a creek. Going in the cell door in Maury's grip, Andy Beaker started to buck. The jailor, who had drawn his gun the moment he got orders to escort the prisoner, watched the struggle and never got a chance to even cock the hammer. Striking with snakelike swiftness, Dana jumped him. Jammed one of his guns in the man's back and clapped a hand over the man's mouth from behind him. The next instant, Beaker had spun on a heel, levering up his hoglegs Dana had turned over to him. Dana snapped his Colts barrel down across the gun-bearing hand of the jailor and the weapon clattered across the floor. Maury darted in and relieved the man of his big ring of keys.

"Easy as sliding down a greased pole," the kid crowed. "We oughta play this game a heap."

He went up to John Hawes' cell and twisted a key in a stubborn lock and tugged open the door. He had to call to him twice. Hawes, sitting on his bunk with a cold quirly stub in his mouth, was like a sleep-walker at first. Then when he found himself outside the door and saw the jailor a captive, it dawned on him. The wooden look of hopelessness left his lean face and his eyes flared with their striking brightness of old.

"All right," Dana said to the jailor as Hawes stared speechless. He jerked him down toward the head of the stairs. "Now you call down to Brane that the prisoner Hawes has killed himself! Sabe?" He knew an hombre with a blunt stubborn jaw like that would be tough to handle. "Don't and we use you as a human shield to smoke our way out, mister. Sabe?"

You could almost see the man's thoughts working behind his narrowed eyes. Then he nodded and called out. "Hey, Brane! Brane! The other prisoner—John Hawes—he's killed himself! Hurry!"

"Now, back you go!" snapped Dana. He saw the man's plan. He meant to yell a warning to Brane when he reached the stairs. Beaker grabbed the jailor too. They hustled him back to Hawes' recent cell. Shoved him in the door. A gun barrel cracked down over his skull, knocking him out.

When pin-headed Brane came to the top of the stairs, he saw Dana Rank peering in the open door of Hawes' cell. Beaker was in the other cell. Dana was saying, "Are you sure he's dead? Are you sure?"

It was simple. Brane came hopping down the line and pushed his

head into the cell. And smack into Maury's gun muzzle. From behind, Dana jammed another into his ribs. Beaker had already slid from his cell to go to the head of the stairs in case others were following the acting sheriff. But Roberts and the other gent had apparently left.

In a matter of moments they were hurrying down the stairs after giving Brane the same treatment the jailor had gotten. Back in the locked cell he lay sprawled across the jailor's limp form. Ahead, Maury ran to the rear door with the keys, shoved the heavy cross-bar and worked at the lock. Neither the first nor the second key of the jailor's ring fitted the lock. Dana had a hunch none would. It looked like the front way.

THE HINGES of the front door whined thinly as somebody came in. And almost simultaneously there was a crash as John Hawes pitched from halfway up the stairs. The long confinement had weakened his legs.

"Who's that? Who's back there?" came a cry from up front.

There was nothing to do but march forward and attempt to bluff it out. If they failed to, they would only rouse suspicion. Helping John Hawes up, Dana shoved his own Stetson on the other man's head to hide his identity as much as possible. Dana and Beaker led the way into the front office.

"We're the deputies from Elcor. Just brought a prisoner up," Dana said casually to the three men wearing deputies badges in the open doorway. "Mr. Brane's upstairs now locking him in."

"Oh. . . . Is it the one who claimed he was Dana Rank?"

Dana shook his head. Another few steps and they would be in the clear. "Reckon we'll do a little irrigating of the tonsils."

Boots scraped the steps and the three made way for Sheriff Mumford. One of them explained about the "deputies" from Elcor. Big Mumford's jaw broke the rhythm of its tobacco-chewing.

"Hey, you ain't the regular men who work as Winrod's special deputies now," he growled, just being officious at first. "All right. You gents got Winrod's order for the prisoner. I'll have to sign it."

"Lost it," said Beaker quickly. That was a mistake.

Mumford stopped en route to the desk, stared. "Hey, that's John Hawes there, by grab!" He ripped out an oath as he clawed up the gun on the desk instead of going for the holster.

That gave him the first shot. It drilled Andy Beaker through the left forearm. Beaker lurched backward, banging into Maury. That eliminated him for the moment too. Dana had his hoglegs free of leather. He put a slug in the sheriff's leg. The latter dropped and rolled behind the end of the desk. But the men in the doorway, the posse who'd been out with him, were already firing. Lead raked into the hallway. It was a miracle none of the jail-breaking quartet weren't killed on the spot. They had to back into the hallway.

It looked like a cul de sac, a blind-end trap. But with a brain flash that surprised even him, Dana Rank got the only answer. He sent two slugs at the lamp on the sheriff's desk. The second one got it, glass spattering as the light was extinguished. And that made the trio in the doorway backgrounded by the light from the main street.

"Let the dang pelicans have it!" roared Andy Beaker.

THEY DID. One of the possemen went down hard and rolled off the steps outside. The other two jumped back into the night. Dana roared and the four of them rushed across the office. The sheriff edged up behind the desk but ducked when a bullet clipped the wood beside him. They knew there wasn't a split second to be wasted. If the town once rallied to back the badge packers—

They made the door, Dana's slug sending a posseman scuttling away from the picket fence to one side. Maury screamed. Blinded by blood from a bullet nick in his forehead, John Hawes had stumbled back inside.

"Git him, Dana!" barked Andy Beaker, shooting with his good arm. "I'll keep these turkeys hunting cover!"

Dana rushed back inside, steered the half-wild Hawes out. The hopelessness of grim weeks wiped away, poor Hawes was almost locoed in his desire to get all the way free now. They got out to the side of the road, but Hawes' underpinning was shaky. He had to be steadied as they tried to beat for the alley on the run. Abruptly the night seemed to sprout muzzle flame on three sides. Men, including a heap of wire-tough Slash-R gunhands, were rushing in from both ends of the road.

"Look out for that Texican! That Andy Beaker!" screamed a man through the din. "Look out for Beaker!"

The stumbling Hawes went down again. Recklessly, Dana rushed halfway out into the road. One of his guns went empty, but he drove men back to the cover of the buildings on the other side, one of them screaming like a banshee with pain. He drew back into the dense shadow of a wooden awning to thumb in fresh shells and up ahead Beaker made the head of the alley where the ponies were.

Young Maury was helping Hawes along and shooting with his free hand. They got a break when a pony, struck by a stray slug, wheeled and came stampeding in zigzag fashion down the street. Then Dana, bringing up the rear, jumped into the alley. As the others made for the ponies he slowly backed, firing methodically to keep men from swarming in. He felt like a hunted animal. It was ironical that he, the man who actually owned half the town, should be skulking out of it with hombres howling for his blood.

A woman's screech came through the welling uproar. It recalled Lucinda to his mind. Strangely, in the welter of gunfire, it came to him that she had been wearing a pink gingham dress; that there had been no sign of any mourning for him, her supposedly dead fiance.

A stone hit him in the back and he twisted his head in a swirl of gunsmoke to see Maury waving from the back end of the alley. They were ready to light out. Dana coolly waved him to go ahead. Yard by yard, he retreated, firing as he went. A couple of gents dove into the mouth of the alley and dove out again. Dana turned and made tracks. He hit the saddle of his pony on the dead run as Maury released the bridle reins.

They tore across back yards, spurred down beside a meeting house to emerge on a side street, bolted across it and went angling at top speed through a cluster of shacks and hovels sprawled across the side of the hill in a sparse stand of trees. Dana forged to the front and led them looping back at the lower end of the town. Boldly they rode across the abandoned end of the main road. Everybody had pushed up to the heart of the town to see about the jail break. In a few minutes they passed through the red willows flanking the bank of a creek and headed downstream into the range country.

AFTER an hour of hard riding, they drew up. Dana yanked a Bowie knife and slashed off the sleeve of Beaker's wounded arm. It wasn't serious; the slug had passed cleanly through the flesh. Removing the bandanna Beaker had knotted around it, Dana washed it out and then made a crude bandage.

"Wasn't the silver bullet so it couldn't really hurt me," said Beaker chuckling. But they all knew it would be a week or more before he could use that arm in a gunfight. And it was serious because they were hunted hombres now. He passed over a bottle to give the slumping Hawes a drink.

John Hawes coughed after swallowing a slug, then breathed in the range air noisily. "By grab, that smells good. Mebbe some day I'll git the jail stink outa my system."

"One thing's bad," Beaker mentioned. "Somebody recognized me, and the Slash-R knew the Toby brothers had hired me to come in. That'll hook them inta this thing. Bad. . ."

"Everything'd been all right if

we'd made the getaway afore that damn Mumford shoved in his big face!" said Hawes. "What—"

Maury cut his eyes at Dana Rank. Dana felt a flush mounting on his face. He and the kid knew how he had delayed things. . . .

CHAPTER XII

THEY WOKE the next morning in Jackson's Hole. It was a huge, age-old sink-hole up in the hills fringing Gunshot Valley on the west. It had drawn its name from an outlaw called Jackson who had been trapped in there years ago. A posse had killed every last man. Ever since it had been regarded as a death trap. The only way in and out had been the little creek running through a cut in the circular walls. At the far side of the hole the creek had dived beneath the surface to go underground.

But the place was no longer a trap, as John Hawes had just shown them. Over the years, the creek had dried up to a bare trickle. Pulling aside the heavy vines and underbrush against the back wall, Hawes showed them the bed of the old creek where it wormed down under the stone. The black maw of the tunnel, almost ten feet high, gaped at them.

"It runs 'bout a coupla hundred yards underground," John Hawes explained. "A man could lead a horse through all the way—till he got to the other side where she comes out. One of Jackson's men drowned years ago trying to get through."

"How does that help us now?" Maury asked.

"She comes to the surface on the side of a ridge out there. And now the hole over there is big enough to git a horse through. Me and some of the boys dynamited it that big."

They wanted to know why Hawes had done it. His startling bright eyes drew into hot points. "Me and —well, some of the boys—planned to declare war on that greedy slob Rank and his outfit. . . .We was going to quit our ranches and keep raiding him and holing up here. Then I was arrested on that fake rustling charge and. . . ." His voice drained off. But he called Dana Rank ugly names in a hoarse whisper.

THEY WERE back around the embers of the campfire, Andy Beaker drinking another cup of java. Hawes had tried to thank them for snaking him out of the jail. "Don't know that she makes much difference, though. Rank is dead. But Will Keene's running the show and his stripe is the same as Rank's." He eyed Dana Rank himself. "Something 'bout you—the way you move or something—it reminds me of Rank."

"Joe Dana is distantly related to Rank," put in Maury. "That damn Dana never recognized the kinship though, did he, Joe?"

"Oh. . . .Well, Keene is just as bad poison as Rank ever was. He's even brought in three more trigger slammers as a personal bodyguard for himself. One of 'em's Latigo Patrick."

"Half Mex, from California. He's bad medicine. I know." He tapped a short white chip mark on his jaw. "Little memento Latigo gave me over in Socorro one night."

"Him and two others Keene has around him every moment. He's stepped into Rank's boots and he knows he inherited all Rank's enemies. He's even married Rank's woman."

"What?" Dana caught himself too late.

"Sure. That's what all the celebration was about last night. It ain't been announced officially yet, but Lucinda Hemley and Keene got hitched in secret in some town outside the valley. The jailor told me."

Dana went over to sit down on a rock and pretended to be inspecting his leg bandage. His legs were shaking, and the blood was smashing in his temples like tom-toms gone amok. Like a mirage the greedy pout of the haughty girl's mouth rose before his eyes. She had never loved him; she had always been after the Slash-R. That was evident now. Just the same, he felt betrayed.

Now he understood why she had refused to recognize him out in the

field at twilight. Married to Will Keene, she would lose everything if Dana Rank himself were proved to be still among the living. Dana heard again the wild cackling of that orey-eyed Justice of Peace back at the town on the mesa by the butte.

When he walked back to the others, a crazy half-laughing glitter was in his gray eyes. "Well, some men were ready to buck Dana Rank himself. Will Keene's taken over—but he can't be any worse. So—"

"He'll be hunting us," said Maury Lewes worriedly.

"Why wait for him to give us a catching? Let's attack him and his Slash-R! There are still wrongs to be righted. I say, shoot the works!" He meant it, savagely. The fury locked in him gave him a cold recklessness. . . .

THEY WERE in the line of cottonwoods along the top of the low slope on which the Sombrero-T of the Toby brothers sat. There was no moon at the time, but the cluster of ranch buildings were clearly etched in the starlight. There had been an argument about coming here.

Andy Beaker claimed he had to report to the Tobys who had hired him to come in. They would be expecting him, he said. And it would be part of the fight against the Slash-R. Dana had said no to it, he couldn't back his stand with anything definite. After all, once he thought he had known his cousin, his faithful foreman, Keene; now he knew he had never known anything but the surface of Will Keene, what he cared to be let seen. Yet Dana had a feeling.

"What the devil," Beaker had snapped out, scowling. "You act like you was used to running the whole show, Joe Dana!" And Dana had been forced to button up his lip.

So here they were. Six of them now. John Hawes had led them to two of his men, more friends than hired hands. gents who'd been working cows with him nine-ten years each. They had been waiting in a fence-line cabin to meet up with him when he got out of jail. Dockins was one, an oldish gray-haired man, heavy in the middle, but with the seamed stubby-jawed face of a dogged fighter. Pop Moss was the other, younger, a taciturn half pint with an old knife scar worming down from one corner of his mouth.

"Somebody's still up. I can see a little light in the house," Andy Beaker said, flipping the silver bullet as he sat the saddle.

The lean John Hawes seconded it. "But there's no sense putting all our eggs in one basket. . . .Will Keene's temper is a-going to be hotter 'n a cap pistol after that jail-break. Might be a trap."

It was decided Beaker would go down with one other man to back his play just in case. Without quite knowing why he did it, Dana swung his pony forward. He and Beaker rode down the slope slowly, paused to study the low dobie bunkhouse of the Sombrero-T.

"Not a dang sign of life there."

Dana nodded and dropped off his cayuse. All he knew was that he craved to come to grips with Keene and the Slash-R. Beaker followed suit, swore softly when his wounded arm was jarred. They went leading their ponies on down. There was a little rivulet of water where some Spanish bayonet stalks spiked into the night and they ground-anchored their ponies there and advanced cautiously. Dana was recalling that just before he went away he'd heard the Sombrero-T kept a night guard about the place, fearing attack from a Slash-R bunch. There didn't seem to be any guard about now.

THEY WENT up on the porch and knocked on the door. No light appeared in the front of the house nor was there any sound. But suddenly the door was pulled open and a tall gaunt man with a cocked short-gun stood there. His high sharp-sloping forehead seemed to run right back into his bald skull. It was the eldest Toby, Samson.

"I'm Beaker, Andrew Beaker, Toby. I've come."

"Nope, we didn't see no bay stallion with a star in its forehead around

this way, Mister. No sign of him. We—"

"Are you locoed?" broke in Beaker. "I'm Beaker, the gun—"

"Reckon you better keep on a-hunting. We don't want nobody's horses on this outfit." The tall Toby spoke in an unnaturally loud voice. Then he dropped it a notch. "Hit the leather and make tracks! Keep a-making 'em." Dana caught the note of urgency under his words. It was as if he was trying to get over a secret message.

Beaker swore. "Dang it, I got your letter here. You agreed to pay me—"

"Don't go accusing us," Samson Toby said hurriedly. "We ain't seen that horse. Reckon you'd better git off Sombrero land pronto. Pronto, I said, if you don't want a hole in your hat—or head!" Again there was the masked urgency. "You—" There was a faint furtive sound down the hall behind him.

A door at the end of the hall opened noiselessly a few inches. Dana had a split-second glimpse of a girl behind it. There was something fairly familiar about her. Then he saw something else, two hunched-over figures moving out of a room to one side of the hall. The faint narrow line of light from the partially opened door just barely touched them.

"Who's there, Toby?" one of them demanded.

"Just some jugheaded jackass who—"

"Me, Andy Beaker," put in the riled Texan. "I—"

Samson Toby threw himself to one side of the hallway, doubling. In almost the same instant, Dana thrust Beaker sideward. Two shots sliced out of the dimness through the doorway.

"Come on, Latigo!" bawled one of the men through the whiplash of gun reports. The notorious Latigo Patrick, Will Keene's new gun ace, was there.

DANA and Beaker ran off the porch. Lead hissed through the high grass about them as they ran. Both turned and sent bullets biting at the porch as the other pair emerged from the house. One of them jumped the railing at the end of the porch, caught in the starlight once before he ducked behind a bush. Dana swore as he missed him. It was the slouching hound-like Latigo himself.

"Let's git clear of here. Something's wrong," Andy Beaker called over. It was obviously a trap, and Beaker figured there'd be more teeth in it than those two.

They kept backing without breaking into actual flight. The second man had slipped off the porch and he and Latigo were spiking away at the pair from two angles. Dana noticed there was no attempt to rush them, to overtake them. They were kept from cutting over toward the trail in front of the ranchyard. And Latigo was crouched in the grass back by the base of the windmill to keep them from going that way. Dana had the feeling they were being herded toward a certain point. Muzzle froth stained the night and lead crisscrossed over the slow-waving grass.

Then came the answer. The crackle of a gun came from behind them. Dana twisted to see Maury Lewes' yellow head rising next to the corral fence. Maury was hammering lead at the bunkhouse door that gaped open now. Answering fire issued from the bunkhouse. Vague figures moved back inside the doorway. But they couldn't get out with the button controlling the entrance.

"Slash-R buzzards! Slash-R!" Maury was howling.

That was the trap, what Latigo and the other gunman from the house were driving them back into. It was a trap set to be sprung on Andy Beaker who, Keene had figured, would come to see the Toby brothers.

Dana ran hard to get near Maury and joined his fire with the button's. Hoofs thudded as John Hawes and his two men came pounding down from the cottonwoods. Little Maury had slipped in after Dana and Beaker, and Dana thanked his lucky stars the kid had.

There was a heap of shouting and more gun snapping. Latigo and his gun pard ducked back into the house.

Beaker brought the two ponies out of the Spanish bayonet stalks. They hit saddle leather and busted the breeze out of there. On the other side of the cottonwoods, once again Dana Rank took the lead and began to swing to the southwest. They hit the trail, turned down it, then went out into a draw. When they drew up a couple of miles from the other end of it, there were no sounds of pursuit.

"It was a danged trap all right. But I can't understand the Toby brothers selling out like that," Beaker said.

"That isn't important now," Dana said flatly.

"Well, what is?" asked Hawes.

Dana put a match to his hand-rolled quirly. He was getting almost adept at making those Durham tubes now. "Keene has just hit at us. He'll figure now we'll crawl into our holes—like all the others who tried to help the late Dana Rank. But we ain't going to play it his way."

"No? What in tarnation are we going to do?"

Beaker said that but Dana kept his gray eyes fixed on John Hawes. "Once, Hawes, you and some others were planning to make war on Dana Rank. All right, let's! Let's hit back instead of waiting for him to crush us."

"How?" The other riders moved closer around Dana.

"Few miles down from here, the Slash-R's got a big bunch of cattle on the north section. They were planning to move 'em in for shipping right soon." His gaze travelled around, a wild devil-be-damned look on his once-handsome face. "I say, let's do some fence cutting and run them cattle off!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE RISING sun was a bloody spot behind the leaden gray overcast in the east as they sent another bunch of cows stampeding up into the timbered arroyo beyond the gap hacked in the Slash-R fence. Dana Rank was shouting and beating with his hat at some whitefaces as he sent his cayuse cutting into them to spread them out. Through the muttering thunder of hoofs came the click of horns, an occasional angry bellow, the sharp crashing down of brush. Then there were gunshots.

Dana was immediately swinging back toward the fence-line, straining his eyes through the slow boil of ground mists. Beaker and one of Hawes' cowhands, Pop Moss, had been stationed on a knoll inside the north section to watch for Slash-R men. There was another gun report, the prolonged reverberating crack of a rifle. Hawes himself came driving around from the other side of a low hillock. In a few moments, they sighted Beaker and Pop riding to join them in the foggy atmosphere.

"It was a Slash-R cow nurse," called Beaker. They had put him to rout, Pop trailing him down to the water-hole where he had vented his headpiece with a slug. The rider had been headed homeward hell-bent for election when last seen.

"All right. We make tracks outa here now, then," Dana said. "We've run off plenty of stuff for one night's work." He had a strange feeling, though. There wasn't much triumph for him. This was his own outfit actually that he was rustling from. He was robbing himself, but there seemed no other way. Little Maury could have told who he actually was. But Maury was outlawed himself as a partner of the late Sam Hawes, was also wanted for trying to bust into the jail down at Elcor. And Dana himself now had a price on his head as the alleged impersonator of himself. The world seemed to have gone locoed.

Maury spoke, sleeving his yellow hair back off his sweaty forehead. "Sure. We run off some cow critters. What good'll it do us, though? It'd be worth our hides to try to sell 'em. They'll round 'em up. So—"

"When they try to round 'em up—that's when the fun begins," said Dana. "We'll drive that last bunch over by the hillock up onto Rattlesnake Ridge."

Later when they munched a cold breakfast of jerked beef and stale bread, John Hawes, bright eyes riveted on lines he scratched in the dirt

with a twig, said it didn't make sense to him. "My uncle, Sam, he's dead—dead because Rank drove me off my place. That sent Sam on the owlhoot again. But Rank's dead and gone himself now, so I can't git revenge on him. I'd like a stand-up shot at Will Keene. He did a heap of Rank's dirty work. I'd take a chance on my life for that. But—"

"That's the way men tried to fight Rank," Dana himself said drily, plainly impatient. "And they all ended up holding the losing hand. Have some sense. Wait till those Slash-R waddies comb Rattlesnake Ridge."

Rising from his hunkered-down position, Hawes stretched slowly. "Seems to me like you're trying to make the lightning jump outa too small a jug, Joe Dana."

"Wait till they comb Rattlesnake Ridge!"

IT WAS early the next morning before the Slash-R men, tracking down and rounding up the run-off cattle, moved toward the brakes of the ridge. The little bunch watched them work into the heavy brush to comb out the critters. They were back of a piece of rim rock, studying the scene through Andy Beaker's field glasses. Dana belly-wriggled back from the rock and rose.

"All right. Hawes and Maury, you two come along with me. Andy, keep a close watch with the glasses. If you see any of those Slash-R men trying to ring us in, cut loose with the rifles on 'em." Dockins and Pop Moss, Hawes' ranch hands, had Winchesters.

John Hawes frowned. "Look, Dana. Well—well, sure we can burn down a few of them Slash-R boys. But they're just working for wages; we ain't got no score to settle with 'em. If they was to jump us, why it'd be different."

"We aren't busting a cap on them unless they try to shoot," Dana said stiffly. . . .

A LITTLE later, a Slash-R man was pushing his cayuse through the heavy greasewood up a cow path, swearing at the chore. He could hear an old mosshorn through the screen of brush. The path angled sharply. The next moment, his pony was plunging groundward, tripped by a rope stretched across the path. The cowhand landed on all fours, scrambling. He saw a pair of boots through the grass, hooked a hand for his holster. Then a gun barrel glanced off the side of his head as a man stepped in from the other side of the path. Dazed, he was jerked to his feet. A yellow-headed button dented his belly with a gun muzzle. The Slash-R man opened his jaws to yell just in time to have a neckerchief gag rammed into his mouth. Almost at the same instant, a man was binding his wrists behind him with a pigging string.

"Another rifle for us," said one of them as he led the cowhand's pony back and pointed to the one in the saddle boot.

Half a mile over on the ridge, some while later, a Slash-R bunkhouse hand was working along a spiny back. Somebody—he'd only had a glimpse of a sombrero—had called from up ahead that several critters were up there. "Hey, in here! In here!" came a call suddenly from the left. The man pushed in, bending low over the saddle horn. He did glimpse a cow's rump through the foliage. The animal was going in the other direction as if driven. There was a break in the greasewood, a small clearing.

"Over here!" said somebody from the other side of it. He pushed across, drawn by a groaning sound. Too late he heard the approach of the rider who'd swung in behind him. He grabbed at a staghorn gun butt, twisting in the kak. A slug almost clipped off the end of his nose and his hands went up. Dana Rank, who'd almost knocked off his nose, stepped from behind a tree. The man was dragged from the kak, arms trussed and quickly gagged.

"Hey, what's the trouble up there? Is anything wrong?" came a shout from down the ridge.

In a matter of moments, hat jerked low over his face, Dana appeared in the narrow path astride his cayuse. Peered at the red-shirted man a couple of hundred feet down. "'S

all right, Barny! Just popped at a dang sidewinder." Then he wheeled from sight. Nothing further happened; Barny was satisfied because the rider knew his name.

Dana said it was enough. They headed back for Jackson's Hole with their two prisoners. Beaker wanted to pump a few shots along the ridge to "put the fear of Almighty Gawd in 'em" as he put it. But Dana said no.

"Leave it this way. These two probably won't be missed till the bunch goes in for chuck at sundown. Then there'll be no explanation; they'll never know what hit 'em. That'll give 'em a bigger scare than if they found them shot dead." The others nodded.

They got back to the Hole. Beaker wanted to know what they'd do with the prisoners when they had to go out again. Dana said they could leave them trussed up in the tunnel of the old creek bed. Dana gulped some grub and went over to his pony on the picket line. Maury followed.

"You figure that somehow this working on the Slash-R will get you a crack at Will Keene, Rank?" he asked. When Dana only shrugged, Maury said, "If you don't get Keene, who're you going to prove who you are and get back the Slash-R?"

Dana rubbed his stubbled chin. He had decided to grow a beard. In Union Hill, they'd only had a glimpse of this new face he had. A beard would prove an effective disguise when he ventured into the town again. "Don't know," he said without much interest. "Don't know about that part of it. But this I *do* know. There are wrongs to be righted in Shotgun Valley, and the power of the Slash-R has to be broken to right those wrongs."

When he mounted, they wanted to know where he was headed. "To bait a trap for some more Slash-R gun slicks." And he rode out.

HIS destination was a ramshackle place at a crossroads out on the range above Union Hill. It was run by a breed called Hatch, a sleepy-looking little man with an obsequious manner who had been a trigger slammer before a wound had withered his right arm. He made it a business to be everybody's friend. Rank knew about him because he had been in his employ for more than two years. Hatch would pass on gossip and overheard information to him, especially about the little ranchers who used to drop into his place. Dana Rank was betting on the breed playing the same role for Will Keene now.

It was mid-afternoon when he walked into the dingy fly-buzzing place. Nobody else was around. Hatch served him a drink and rubbed his hands obsequiously and wanted to know if he were a stranger in these parts.

"Not exactly," Dana parried, delighted the man did not recognize him. "Been in the Valley before. That time though Dana Rank and the Slash-R rodded the whole show."

One of the breed's eyebrows jerked up. "Rank's dead and gone, but it looks like the Slash-R is still the big potato in the Shotgun."

"Looks!" Dana sneered. "There's a bunch of the little ranchers who're going to make a heap of trouble for this new boss, Keene."

The breed sucked his breath. "But the Slash-R can crush any little outfit that starts anything. 'S always what's happened. They can run off their stuff and break 'em."

"That's already happened to these gents. That's why they call themselves the Broken Band." He had made that up on the spur of the moment. "They've already been run off their land, so they've got nothing to lose."

Hatch set up a drink on the house and leaned confidentially on the bar. "Fella like me, he can't do nothing now. But I always hated that range-gobblin' Slash-R crowd. Still, what can this Broken Band do?"

"You'd be surprised." Dana looked mysterious and went silent for a few moments. "But I'll tell you this. It's confidential, you understand?"

The breed raised his left hand solemnly. "Ya don't think I'm a leaky-mouthed galoot do you? It won't go beyond me."

"Well-l. . . .Well, anyway, Keene

might find himself facing a jury before long. Sure. Two gents have disappeared from the Slash-R bunkhouse. They've sold out."

"What? Sold out? To who?"

"To the Broken Band."

"That so? Well, what for?"

Dana looked around warily. "I shouldn't be telling you this. But—well, maybe those men can testify to what Will Keene did when the Slash-R broke John Hawes. . . .Don't want to say more than that." One of the men they had captured on Rattlesnake Ridge, Belson, had been with Keene when they blotted Slash-R cattle with Hawes' brand to build the bogus rustling charge against him.

Hatch, the breed, rolled the stub of brown quirly across his mouth. Shrugged. "The Slash-R'll get them two gents—and silence 'em."

"They got to find them first."

"That's so. . . .You know where they are?"

Dana put on a poker face. "I'm not saying—too much, anyway." He had another drink, then dug out some silver as if it were the last in his pocket. "Was figuring on picking up a jug of redeye for—for my friends. But I'm a mite short of dinero. Would you—"

HE GOT no further. Hatch pointed to a crude sign saying, "Drinks—Cash," and shook his head.

"Well, I'll be passing this way tomorrow, I reckon. I'll get it then." Outside, a ranch buckboard drew up. The driver got down and went around to the well at the side for water for the ponies. Through the doorway, Dana had a good view of the woman on the seat. A girl, really, despite the way she sat so stiff-backed with that uncompromising attitude toward the world. The snub nose and highly burnished brown hair seemed familiar.

"That new school marm," said Hatch. "A high-spirited filly too."

Dana remembered her then. He went out, leading his pony from the shade, fussing with the cinch to get a good look at her. It brought home sharply his new position in the world. Formerly, as the awed wealthy owner of the Slash-R, he could have met her easily. And if she were like other females, she would have been flattered by his attention. The next moment, he realized she was not like other females.

Calmly she looked his way and let her eyes meet his. Then the blue eyes slowly, impersonally ran over him from spurs to hat brim. For a moment he felt like a piece of horseflesh on the block. She wasn't beautiful, but there was something striking in the high-set cheekbones and the wide full-lipped mouth. Something fine, too. He scowled slightly as he swung up. Never again was he taking any filly seriously. One of them had already sold him out. They were as bad as men; they all had a price. He turned his cayuse westward, in the direction whence he had come. The buckboard was headed the other way.

She spoke to the man with the water bucket at the nose of one of the team. "Ed, did you say that was Black Pete Venzan and some of his boys we saw at that hoeman's place a couple of miles back down the trail?" She had a bell-clear voice, much too attractive for a school marm.

"That's right, Miss Hill," said Ed. "Venzan, all right."

Dana Rank gave no sign. He figured it was pure luck to pick up that information. Venzan would be working for Will Keene as he once had for him, Dana. Venzan's bunch were probably trying to pick up sign of the gents who had snaked John Hawes out of jail.

Dana veered his pony to ride down beside Hatch's joint and hit out northward. Sure was lucky, that school marm mentioning that. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

FROM A CRAMPED position in a yellow pine the next day, using the field glasses, Maury called down the word they'd been awaiting. Slash-R riders were coming down the trail from the north. Maury slid down the tree quickly. They held a hurried council of war.

"They're coming like coyotes to a

down cow," crowed Maury, checking his hoglegs. "Let 'em git inside and we can blow the damn daylights outa 'em!"

Dana shook his head. "We don't want any avoidable bloodshed. We'll be able to use the ones we grab yet—either as hostages or as a threat to Keene. Besides, there's too few of us. We can't spare losing a single man."

"There was eight-nine of them." Maury repeated what he had called down from the tree. "If we don't jump them, how're we—"

"I'll be in there when they arrive—which is what they hope to find. . . ." He detailed the plan, speaking quickly and incisively. This new role of free-booting lobo suited him, he realized. But deeper in his mind was disappointment that Will Keene himself wasn't with the Slash-R bunch. He looked forward to the day when he would have a show-down with that double-crosser, dreaming of it in the long reaches of the night.

"You're taking one hell of a big chance, Joe," Hawes said glumly. What had been done to him had made him a confirmed pessimist.

"That's our business," Dana said curtly and swung up. "My turn now; somebody else's turn later."

HATCH, the breed, greeted Dana like a long-lost friend when he entered the ramshackle crossroads place. He was too affable, exactly as Dana had expected him to be. It simply proved he had been in touch with the new boss of the Slash-R, as Dana had hoped. Hatch set him up to a drink and said he had the jug of redeye all ready.

"Say, I thought mebbe you was talking through your head-piece a mite yesterday, friend," the breed confided. "But last night I heard a coupla other gents talking. Them evicted cowmen are sure hitting the warpath."

"That so?" Dana gave him noncommittally.

The breed said he had to see to his cooking in the kitchen. Door hinges creaked. Dana tiptoed to the entrance to the kitchen. Through one of its grimy windows he could see Hatch hastily hanging a blue shirt on the clothesline in the back yard. The yard was in plain sight of the knoll on the road coming down from the south. The shirt was a signal all right. The Slash-R men would be coming in soon, headlong for the capture, Dana hoped.

Hatch returned and poured a drink for each of them. Dana was scowling. He pulled his guns and whacked them down on the bar heavily. The breed recovered from his astonishment and asked him what the matter was.

"Expecting a gent to blow in here. And when he comes, I'm going to put two holes in his head. One where the slug goes in and one where it comes out!"

"For the lova Gawd, don't do it in here! I—"

"It's hot out in that sun."

"You can't shoot up my place. You gotta go out and—"

"Who's going to make me go out?" He lounged comfortably on the bar. Hatch made as if to go to the rear again. "Stay here. You got lice in your britches?"

A little time passed. Sweat poured down the breed's face. Dana caught the scratch of pony hoofs over a patch of shale. He shot a glance out a side window commanding the north trail, then was around the corner of the bar.

"That pelican isn't coming alone." He hunkered down behind the bar, under the counter itself. "I got you covered. Keep quiet about me or. . ."

"Sure, sure." Hatch's teeth chattered.

In a couple of minutes, horses drew up in front of the place. Dana risked a peek around the front end of the bar. Several men were coming in, guns bared. The lead man was that Barny, Dana had shouted to on Rattlesnake Ridge. He was wearing a red shirt again. Barny thought a red shirt was lucky. A couple more came in from the kitchen.

"Where's the pelican, Hatch?" snapped Barny.

"N-nobody—nobody's here," said the breed. "Not now." Just a few feet from the crouched Dana, Hatch's knees shook inside his jeans.

"They's a hoss outside," said Barny.

"That gent you gave us word about—"

The breed was between the devil and the deep. He coughed nervously. "He was here but—but he stepped out. He's expectin' a gent. He—he's going to gun him, he said."

"Wait, boys. No sense scaring him off. We'll wait. He'll be back if he's got a date to kill a gent. Say, what's this hombre's name, Hatch? And set us up some gila juice!"

DOWN out of sight, Dana gloated. Things were going the way he had mapped them. Hatch edged toward the back end of the little bar counter. But he discarded that idea when one of Dana's gun muzzles thumped against his shin bone. Barny and his men had a drink.

"Mebbe we better have a look around," Barny said finally. "'Course, his pony is still here and—" A pony nickered as a horseman rode up. "Who's this jughead?"

Dana set himself as he heard the dismounted rider—it was Pop Moss of Hawes' old outfit-approach the door. "Looking for a sidewinder called Smith," he called out. "He's a big jasper with black hair. And he's damn overdue for a dose of lead poisoning. You seen him around about?"

All eyes were turned toward Pop Moss just outside the door as Dana rose silently from beneath the bar. With a quick thrust of a foot and an elbow to the ribs, he sent Hatch sprawling full length on the floor, away from any weapons he might have cached behind the bar. Even before the breed hit, Dana had his two levelled gun noses wheeling slowly to cover them.

"Keep the hardware penned, gents, and live to see the sun set!" he snapped casually, giving them a laughing sneer. "Any gent craves a ticket to hell, I can punch it pronto!"

It was like a blow in the dark; they were caught off balance, mentally and physically. Red Barny's eyes twisted wildly in the sockets. A glass fell to the floor from one man's nerveless fingers. In front, Pop Moss had jumped out of the doorway. And his long-barrelled Colts covered them around the edge of the doorway. They had planned to spring the surprise, had never figured to walk into a trap themselves.

DANA jumped out into the open as the rest of his band appeared, having slipped up on the place. Maury led the ones who rushed in the back way through the kitchen. John Hawes joined Pop at the front door. The pot was ready and ripe to be raked in.

"We'll string 'em up like we strung up them other two!" bawled the hot-blooded Maury, almost hoping they'd make a play. He was a smart, slick-headed jasper, except when gunplay threatened. Then bitterness made him wild.

That remark cost. Red Barny's hooded eyes focussed on a reflection in the piece of mirror hung behind the bar. It showed him Hatch's half-witted brother, who usually cowered in a little shack out in the back strip, peering goggle-eyed in one of the side windows at the scene. Figuring he was due to stretch rope anyway, he turned, spiked a finger at him, and yelled:

Dana's men switched that way. And Red Barny grabbed for his shooting irons. If he had to die, it was going to be swapping lead. Somebody fired at the half-wit an instant after he ducked away. Then Barny snapped lead at Dana. Dana's bullet got there first and took him through the right wrist. And John Hawes, refusing to give ground in the front door, smashed a slug through Barny's neck that shattered his backbone. Even as Red Barny went down, Dana had leaped full into the heart of it. Charging, he lashed right and left with his gun barrels.

Men screamed and sank in the bullet ridden room before his rush. Lead nicked his hat brim. Then the last few gave up the idea of making a fight for it, flinging up their hands. And Dana was roaring for his men to cease shooting. As the uproar stilled, there was the spatter of departing horse hoofs out on the trail. In the melee, one of the Slash-R men had dived out a side window and escaped.

Hawes pointed off to the south. A

slow-moving little bunch of dust moved toward the crossroads. It was the stage coming up from Union.

Working fast, they disarmed the seven of the Slash-R, lashed their arms, hoisted them aboard their ponies, and headed for the hills at the west side of the valley.

"Will Keene's going to be hopping mad about this," opined Hawes gravely. "He'll be striking back soon. . . ."

TWO days later, the repercussions came. John Hawes and a couple of men returned through the stringy raw rain from a scouting trip. He stood before the fire slapping the water drops from his hat and gave the news.

"Samson Toby and three men will be joining us. I left word where he could find us." He had gotten the information from a horse rancher with a two-bit outfit up in a side valley.

Dana smiled. That was a good sign. It was proof some folks thought they had a chance to succeed in their game of bearding the powerful Slash-R. But the next moment, Dana's face darkened. Hawes said the marriage of Lucinda Hemley and Keene had been announced. Lucinda had gone to live at the ranch.

"And we've been outlawed," John Hawes went on grimly. "Mumford has started posting notices all through the valley. We can be shot on sight. And—hung if captured. . . ."

It was silent save for the patter of the slow raindrops on the leaves. Dana came off the stump where he was squatting.

"We're the outfit," Hawes went on, "charged with the hold-up of that stage Rank was on and also the slaying of Rank himself."

Dockins swore as he came across the hollow. Dana whirled on him, conscious of how spirits were flagging. "Keep an eye on those prisoners, Dock!" They were kept on the back side of the crater, hobbled so they couldn't make any quick break. "What the hell! Outlawed, eh? Well, what've we got to lose? What?. . . . Shucks, it just shows Will Keene is scared!"

John Hawes wiped rain from his nose. "One more thing. Gene Selvin goes on trial tomorrow morning for attempting to kill Dana Rank."

Dana's mouth tightened at the thought of the half-starved, liquor-crazed Selvin who had made that dry-gulching try for him just before he left town.

"He's still in bad shape," Hawes continued. "But he's got to stand trial. . . .No question of the verdict, of course. The jury'll be poor devils owned locked, stock and barrel by Rank—or, Keene, now. And that hand-picked judge of Rank's —the old drunkard—Philo Haines, you know the sentence he'll hand down. . . .Death. . . .Selvin was a decent gent, too."

Beaker flipped his quirly butt into the fire. "That Dana Rank sure sewed a heap of hell afore he quit this mortal sphere!"

The crater was half as dark as night with the thunderhead hanging over it. But Dana could feel Maury Lewes' eyes on him.

CHAPTER XV

THERE was another burden on him, too. Rank was conscious of it as he worked his cayuse along the wall of the sink-hole to the entrance. He told Pop there, on guard, he was just going to sashay around a little. Outside, he mounted and hit through the broken country toward Union Hill. These men had depended on him, he realized, had accepted his leadership. And his latest blow at Will Keene had kicked back on them savagely. Something had to be done pronto to keep them believing they could whip Keene and the Slash-R.

He reined up suddenly and caught the sound of the pony in the rear. When he looked out from behind the clump of alder, it was the hungry-looking Maury coming along. Dana cursed him.

Maury looked sheepish. "Going to Union Hill, ain't you?"

"Well, somebody has to do something about Selvin."

"All right. But I might as well ride herd on you or I'd have to come in and snake you outa another jail." Both of them grinned a little.

It was about midnight when they hit town, Union Hill going wide open despite the wet weather. At a store, Dana picked up some paper and envelopes. They took a room at a backstreet boarding house over a barroom.

"We'll see what it feels like to bed down under a roof again, kid," Dana said, then sat down and did some writing. He said the letter was to Judge Philo Haines when Maury asked.

"You don't think asking him to let Selvin off will do any good, do you. Dana?"

"Asking?. . . .Sometimes reminding a man of his past helps him to see your point of view, Maury." With a flourish, he signed it, "A Friend." Then he picked up his Stetson. "Now we'll just pick up a few dates concerning the judge's past. . . ."

They went downhill along the main street with coal-oil torches splashing yellow images on the black mirrors of puddles. Across from the hotel, they got a look at Will Keene. Dana stopped as if he had fallen into a hole.

"Tight rein, Dana, tight rein," Maury warned, his own hand on a gun butt.

KEENE, just outside the big doorway of the hotel, was barely visible except in brief glimpses. He was ringed in by four gunmen. One of them Dana recognized, Latigo Patrick. When he heard the name a few days ago, it hadn't registered. But now he knew the big shuffling man who had a way of standing as if he'd go to sleep on his feet. Dana remembered he had almost taken him on the pay roll once himself. Hadn't because he learned the hombre had a pure lust for killing, that he liked to see a man lying dead at his feet. Mentally he put a good mark to his own credit then.

Keene himself, puffing on a black stogie expansively, was resplendent in pearl gray. One of the gun slicks held out Keene's slicker for him, but Keene shook his head. His words carried across the road. ". . .Gotta wait for the little woman. She should be back soon. A married gent soon gits halter broke. . . .But there are advantages, boys." With a lewd wink, he turned and went back inside, the gunmen forming a wall around him.

There would have been no chance of getting him. Certainly none without being punched so full of lead he'd fall out of the bottom of his Justins. Still— He took a short step forward. Logic halted him. If he drew himself a ticket to Boothill, there'd be nobody to right the wrongs in Shotgun Valley. . . .But a day would come. a day.

They moved on down the street. Maury's head was on a swivel. "Dana, you might be spotted by somebody."

Dana Rank grimaced wryly. "Not much danger—with this face. The only man who has seen me as a member of the band got away. He's the only man who'd know me. . . .Down this way." They turned into a side street at the lower end of the Hill. Dana caught a glimpse of himself in a dark window. His beard had become a dark thick-haired spike at the end of his chin. Actually, it was somewhat becoming. No, nobody would know him from having seen him in Union at the time of Hawes' escape from jail. A few paces on and they turned into one of the tougher tawdrier honky tonks of Union.

AT THE bar, Dana warned Maury. "Keep that headpiece of yours on, pard. That yellow head of yours stands out like a grass fire and— There she is!" He moved over toward a girl just coming off the crowded dance floor, offhandedly elbowing her orey-eyed escort out of the picture. "Howdy, May, darling. No see long time. Cold hands, again, honey. Does it still mean warm heart?"

"Hello, Handsome." May giggled, revealing a glittering gold tooth at one side of her mouth. She was buxom, just short of being fat. She

had dyed red hair piled high on her head, face thickly plastered with powder to fill in the gullies, shrewd eyes dripping with mascara. She held her mouth in that set mould against pain of people whose feet hurt. Her hard laugh cackled though in a mimicry of merriment as Dana swung her out onto the floor. But the watching Maury saw that she knew she had never seen him before and was on her guard behind the mask.

Maury saw Dana toss a bill to the bleary-eyed musicians as if he were a dinero-laden spender. Another couple jounced against them as they swept gracefully in a waltz. In his old arrogant manner, Dana grabbed the other man by the shoulder, cuffed him with his left hand, then sent him spinning off the floor. Remembering his role just in time, he caught up red-headed May and glided into a maze of dancers. Watching him, Maury's feelings were mixed. This was the man who had broken his father among others, who had robbed men of their range and herds ruthlessly.

On the other hand, this same Dana Rank had, unarmed, followed him into Elcor and saved his skin when the blowoff came, had risked his very neck by returning to Union to help get John Hawes out of jail. True, he might be doing all this—probably was—to regain his own position and his outfit. But the man packed nerve, a heap of it. And he seemed to be trying to right the wrongs of the past.

When Dana led the red-haired May toward a table in the dim alcove back under the balcony, Maury shifted down to take up a position in a nearby corner. He was close enough to catch their words. Dana saw him and gave him a quick wink. Then he was big-handedly ordering drinks, a bottle of wine for "the lady."

DANA seemed to have an oiled tongue as the kid listened. Just poured out talk, bits of flattery, drops of information that showed he had known her before, never giving her a chance to regain her mental balance. "Sure am real flattered, honey, that you remembered me," Dana flowed on. "Been a long time. More than a year, eh? Have some more wine, madam. It matches your lips... Ha-ha." He dropped a casual arm across her naked shoulders.

"You sure are a sight for old Dan's sore eyes. And speaking of eyes, honey, you're even prettier than the last time I saw you. You had a black eye then. Remember that? Ha-ha... Sure, we'll dance again in a minute. We got all night, haven't we?"

When the wine bottle was half emptied, Dana was still glib with the tongue oil. His voice was as light as ever. But his words took a sharp turn. "You still got that old duffer of a judge—what the devil was his name—paying you off, honey?"

"What do you mean?" The red head jerked her hand away from his.

"Hey, what're you getting scared about? I know how a certain party pays you to keep your marriage to him a secret and—"

Suspicion and belligerence radiated from the redhead. "You're locoed, Mister. I never told you anything like that. Maybe you got me mixed up with somebody—"

Dana still grinned over the black beard. But the gray eyes were stony. "You never needed to tell me. Have you forgotten I was an old friend of Dana Rank's?"

"He's dead!"

"So I hear. 'Course, nobody's seen the body. But that isn't here nor there. I knew Rank for years. Remember his dad, Nat Rank, too. Rank told me a heap of things. And—and Philo Haines, that was the judge's name."

May stared, cold-eyed. She had given a signal, waving a little lace handkerchief once quickly.

"Sure. Dana and I used to laugh about him. Dana called him an old goat and a dang fool in the bargain. You got him to marry you in secret. And later, there was a child, a boy. You sent him off to live somewhere else. And the judge pays you so much per week to keep everything hushed up."

"You're crazy—and I don't think I ever met you before. Now, a friend's waiting for me—" She started to rise. Dana caught her wrist. It

looked like trouble as a burly house guard, in response to her signal, closed on the table.

MAURY galvanized. Then Dana's gray eyes slanted his way quickly, gave him a mute signal. Maury got it, kept his hogleg in the holster. Dana wanted it that way. Somehow those two understood each other like brothers. The house man barged in, opened his jaws to do some browbeating—and swallowed half the drink Dana apparently accidentally flung upward. The other half of it caught him in the eyes. The houseman's hand came up from his half-drawn Colts to paw at his burning eyes.

"Oh, say—my mistake," purred Dana, standing close to him. Close so that he had his fingers on the little Gambler's Special the guard toted in a pocket inside the waistband of his pants. "Thought you were a pelican I been waiting to cut down."

They stood with eyes locked. Dana smiled, a cold devilish smirk of a smile. His other hand came up with a folded bill which he tucked in a pocket of the houseman's shirt.

"No trouble here. The lady and I were just discussing a little matter. It was about a relation of hers—shall I tell him, May?"

Sitting back down heavily, she shook her head. "It's all right, Gene . . .nothing to worry about. I—I saw somebody else."

Dana's demands were curt and harshly voiced when he re-seated himself. He had her now. She couldn't afford to have her arrangement with the judge made public. If it came out, the payments from him would cease. "Now, where did the marriage take place—and when?"

"Up at Broken Bush." She gave the date in a tired voice.

"The boy—the judge's son. . ."

"Tim. . .He lives with my sister in —in Slaterville just over the state line."

Dana stood up, looking as if he'd swallowed something nasty. He hadn't liked that part of it. There was a bill under the bottle. "To get Tim something—something nice. And—don't worry. Nothing will happen to you, May. Nothing will happen at all, I think."

HE AND Maury left swiftly by a side door. They went up to the corner and past Jackson's undertaking parlor, closed now, and into the barbershop next door. The barber was just putting on his stovepipe hat preparatory to shutting the shop. The man had shaven Dana frequently. It amused the real owner of the Slash-R to see the man study him with no sign of recognition.

"I was looking for Tom Jackson," he said. "But I see he has closed up. Got a letter for him. Know what time he opens in the morning?"

The barber said only the Lord knew when anybody would open tomorrow with the trial of Gene Selvin to be held. A lounger cleared tobacco juice through a gap in yellow teeth and said he'd be passing Jackson's house on his way home. He could leave the letter.

"Fine. Just got to add a line." He took the letter over to a shelf, wrote, "P. S. . . .If you think this is a bluff, I know your son, Tim, is living over in Slaterville." Then he sealed it in the envelope addressed to "Judge Philo Haines," put that inside a second envelope, and addressed that one to Tom Jackson. He gave it to the lounger with a coin.

Outside on the street again, he remarked, "Tom Jackson always serves as court clerk for the judge. Tom'll turn that letter over to him first thing in the morning. This way it makes it harder to trace us." He chuckled. "Talk about suborning a jury—this is fixing the judge, all right, I hope!"

They had turned onto a side street leading down to the boarding house. Dana was whistling softly when the door of a house opened and the beam of a lantern shot out and washed over them. They were out of it quickly. But the woman, wrapped in a dark cloak, saying goodbye to her friends, had seen him. She crossed the porch hurriedly. The gunman her husband had sent along to escort

her got off a bench on the porch, yawning.

"Wait just a minute, Peter. I saw a—a friend just pass. I'll be right back," she whispered hurriedly. She stepped into the street and softly moved through the oily dripping shadows after Dana Rank and his companion.

Dana was fast adopting the eternal wariness of a hunted man as if by instinct. At the corner, he nudged Maury. They crossed the other road and went on past the street where the boarding house stood. Thirty-forty feet on, they turned off beyond a sagging barn, slid through the weeds next to it, emerged behind the boarding house, went up along the far side of it, and slipped in the front door.

Behind, at the corner, Lucinda Hemley Keene drew the dark cloak tighter around her and bit off a futile exclamation. She had seen them turn in by the barn. But a glance over her shoulder showed her the guardian gunman just a few yards behind. It would never do to let him suspect that Dana Rank, the true owner of the Slash-R, still lived.

"I guess I was mistaken." And she turned back. But she knew Dana was in town; her sly wire-sharp mind began to plan. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

DANA RANK and Maury were in a barroom that commanded a view of the courthouse when the trial began the next morning. Out in the yard next to the jail, a fresh length of manila hemp dangled from the weathered gallows suggestively. It was a beautiful morning for a hanging, clear and sun-shot with the air like wine. They had seen the prisoner, wasted, ill Gene Selvin, brought down to the courthouse in a wagon and half lifted in by two of Mumford's deputies. The trial was now under way.

Dana was boogery, his hands constantly massaging his gun butts as they awaited the outcome. The verdict was a foregone conclusion, of course. The sentence. . .Dana squeezed one of his gun butts and sweat ran down it. He had stopped off and bought himself a shoulder rig in one store and a light .32 in another, a double-barrelled derringer in a third. The latter was stowed in one of his boots. And now he was wondering if perhaps he should have tried to rescue Selvin and slip him out of town.

Time dripped away like sorghum out of a jug in January. Big Mumford came striding from the courthouse. Another man emerged and came into the barroom. Folks were dumbfounded. The jury had left the box to come to a decision, which was quite a surprise. And it was still out. Dana's eyes took on a new light. Apparently some men were encouraged by the band's bearding of Will Keene. Encouraged enough to buck against taking Keene's orders blind.

A little more time passed. There was a rising mutter from the courthouse; it sounded like a beehive with the inmates buzzing in something like stunned surprise. There was a shout. The sentence had just been handed down, apparently. Men came busting from the place, dispersing to spread the news. It was incredible. Philo Haines, they said, had looked like a haunted thing on the bench. And he had ruled that the health of the prisoner, adjudged guilty finally, made pronouncement of any sentence at that time an empty gesture.

"The judge has adjourned sentencing till one month from today," the news bearer gasped excitedly. "By grab, will Will Keene be blowing his top!"

BEHIND the batwings, big Dana stood watching, shaky with relief, as the crowd poured from the courthouse. "We did it, Maury. We did it," he muttered. The crowd formed an alley down from the doorway. And then Selvin came out supported by two deputies and looking as if he couldn't quite believe he was still alive. Cheers went up from some in the throng. Men waved to him. A woman ran forward and hugged him. They didn't know how it had happened, this reprieve from what had seemed like certain death. But part

of Union Hill had nerve enough to show they were glad Keene and the Slash-R had been checkmated for once.

Dana and the kid headed back for the boarding house to quit town. The job was done. Their ponies were back there. Maury went back to get them when Dana said he wanted to go up to the room a few minutes. There was something else he wanted to write. A will, just in case. As he turned the door knob, he heard something and realized the room wasn't empty. A Colts jumped into his hand and he eased the door open. Then he sighted a woman's skirt, took it for granted it was the landlady, and sheathed the weapon sheepishly.

He stepped in and Lucinda turned her head over her shoulder as he closed the door. It was as staggering as a club over the head. He couldn't talk. She was perfectly poised, smiling slightly. This morning, she had retraced her steps of last night when she had followed Dana briefly. It had been easy to find where he was holed up. It was the only boarding house in the neighborhood. The proprietress came out on the way to market. Posing as the fiancee of Dana—"the big dark man with the broken nose"—Lucinda had learned the location of his room. And she had been searching it for papers or anything else that might identify him, identify him as the man he was, Dana Rank, living. . .

She didn't know there was anything of the kind, but the possibility had been haunting her. If Dana ever was able to prove who he was—or even if he should be killed and then the identification should be found—she would be ruined. She would find herself married to a man with nothing, a criminal perhaps. Will Keene hadn't told her about finding Dana, but the shrewd Lucinda had suspected. And she had, after finding where Dana was staying, covered herself against any contingency by sending a note by a boy to her husband at the hotel. She had told in the note where Dana was living.

So she wasn't scared now. Keene's gun slicks should be walking in any moment. And she had already ascertained there was nothing here to identify Dana Rank as himself. She held the cards, she figured. All she had to do was stall, to lull him into a sense of security.

"DANA," she said, and put a hint of a sob in her voice as she extended a trembling hand, "I saw you last night and followed you. I had—just had to talk to you. . . . There's been a terrible mistake."

His lips were thinned and taut. "Thanks for telling me."

She took a short step closer. "I know. You—you must h-hate me, Da-na. I don't blame you. But it was such a shock when you came up to me in the field that day. I—I didn't know what to think—I was so excited."

He wondered. After all, it had been hard to believe she had done this thing to him in the beginning. "You had time to think afterward."

"It all seemed like some kind of a bad dream—a nightmare. I—I didn't know. I—I—" She put a handkerchief to her face.

"You knew you'd married Keene—practically before my supposed corpse was cold, Lucinda." His own voice shook as he said her name.

She swayed and caught at the end of the bed. "I know, I know. Will—Will Keene—he made me. He—" And she was weeping.

From downstairs, Maury called to see what was wrong. Dana half turned, hesitated. Over the top of her handkerchief, the woman peeped, watched. She speculated on whether she could get the derringer from the front of her dress before Dana turned. But she remembered how cat-fast he was and decided against it. Her charms were a better weapon.

Dana's mind was in a whirl. He caught the faint refreshing odor of the scent he remembered her using. His mind told him he was a fool. Still, it would only be fair to hear her out before judging. He told Maury to wait out in the shed, that he'd be down in a few minutes.

"How—how could Keene *make* you marry him?" he asked drily.

She seated herself slowly on the rumpled bed. "He—he threatened you, Dana. He told me he had found you, badly wounded. He said he would kill you unless I married him—that he had always been crazy for me. . . .It wasn't till after the marriage he told me you were dead."

Dana felt dizzy. It was crazy sounding. Still, it just could be true. Just could be. . . .Her soft sobbing stabbed through him. When her hand came out hesitantly and wrapped around his limp fingers, he didn't pull away. He thought he caught the sound of running boots from the road.

"LORD, Dana—you don't know how terrible it has been! The man is a beast, an animal! He—he made me—oh-h, I can't tell you. . . I've been thinking of killing myself. Yes—*killing myself*, Dana! Don't leave me now! You mustn't! I'll go mad or—or. . . ."

She was in his arms and he was patting her shoulder and telling her not to weep so. A terrible fury ground inside him, grating and tearing with the thought of what Keene must have done to her.

"I'll take you away. "You'll never have to go back to his arms again, Lucy! We'll—here's your sun bonnet. Now we'll—"

"Wait, Dana. . .I—I can't go yet."

"Why not? We'll get you away then I'll find Will and—"

"I can't leave—j-just yet. . . .My legs are too weak," she extemporized hurriedly. "My legs are weak." She had to keep him here a few minutes longer. Will's trigger slammers should be closing in.

"I can carry you, Lucy. I—" The stairs creaked.

She straightened. "Wait, Dana. You—you're in danger. I'll see who it is," she whispered as he grabbed a gun butt. She darted by him, out the door, to stand at the head of the stairs in plain sight of him. She shook her head. "There's nobody coming, Dana. Nobody." She turned, smiling. She would walk back in, put her arms around him, turning him away from the door and then—

CHAPTER XVII

A SHOT SPATTERED the window pane of the room, the slug drilling on up into the ceiling. Actually, it was a warning shot fired from the rear, down in the yard, by Maury. Dana thought it must be a foeman; but it warned him. He grabbed his Colts as he whirled back. And Lucinda had jumped from sight to flee headlong down the stairs. He ran out—and smack into a gunman edging around the door frame into the room. The latter stumbled backward. Dana's gun barrel blow sent him bouncing down the carpeted flight of stairs on his head.

Dana himself stumbled sideward as his spur caught in the carpet and half tripped. He swung back to the head of the stairs and sent three slugs slashing down it at the trio of men at the foot of it. One of them backed against the front door and slowly slid down, fatally drilled dead center through the heart. Dana turned and ran rearward, remembering how the house was built.

Kicking in the door of a back room, he ran to a window in the rear. As he had figured, it gave onto the one-story kitchen that had been tacked onto the back of the house. In another moment, he was out on the tar-paper roof and scrambling down its slant. And he was cursing, cursing himself for being such a jugheaded fool. The woman was a vixen, a scheming deceitful hussy, who had almost lured him to his death. He thought of Maury.

The button came shooting out from the side of the house, yelled, "Dana—look out!" as he waved him away from the back edge of the kitchen roof before he dived into the high grass. Dana half sensed it and rolled and dropped off the side edge of the roof. From his knees, he peered around the outside corner of the kitchen. Two men were in the doorway, waiting to make buzzard bait out of him when he dropped down. His thudding over the kitchen roof had been heard.

He winged one man as he triggered from the corner, then dashed out.

They had to get their ponies and they were back there by the shed. A second gun slick appeared in the kitchen door, triggering at Maury crouched in the grass, taking it for granted he had sent in that shot. Dana pulled up short and calmly hammered two bullets into the man, one through the brain that killed him as he stood. Then he was running again. And Maury leaped from the grass to swing in beside him. Lead geysered dirt in their wake.

But they made it to the shed, hit the leather, cut around sharply to put the shed between themselves and the house. The getaway looked good. Only Will Keene, once he got word Dana could be trapped, hadn't been taking any chances. He had every bet coppered. A carbine crackled from beside that barn on the other street. And Maury's cayuse, whinnying wildly with pain, went limping back into the yard of the boarding house.

DANA went cutting back after him. The wounded horse went down and Maury landed on all fours as Keene gun slicks rushed out of the back of the house. Dana charged full at them, firing, to cover the button. He stopped the rush. But a man in a second-floor window got his pony through the head. Will Keene hadn't spared men to do this job. "To get Dana Rank's killer," he had told them.

Dana flung himself clear and ducked behind a tree, yelling to Maury. The latter came hobbling, an ankle wrenched when he landed. A piece of lead embedded itself in the tree trunk, coming from behind. Men had closed into the horse shed. The net was tightening.

"We gotta make tracks outa here, kid," he snapped as he reloaded swiftly. "Come on!" They scrambled over a low fence with the bullets rattling over the fence rails like hail stones. The only thing that saved their hides at that moment was the fact the rising sun was full in the eyes of the nearest of Keene's gun pack.

The fugitive pair ducked down past the far side of the next door place and into the narrow crooked road in front, but the deck was heavily stacked against them. Two men stationed behind trees on the other side threw down on them. Dana answered the fire, keeping them from drawing careful bead, as they retreated down the road. But the sands were running out against them.

"We gotta get ponies somehow. . . . Down that alley, Maury! Damn you!" A whining slug had nicked Dana in the flesh of the upper left arm. But he found he could still use it as he backed into the alley, then halted behind a boarded-up cabin. When he heard the first bunch of running bootsteps, he recklessly leaped out and rode both triggers. That held them, sending them reeling back, diving for cover on both sides. He hustled down the alley. The hobbling Maury was in a side path that branched off through high grass.

They went down it, crouched low. It led to the back end of a blacksmith's barn. Just as they came out of the grass, a back door in the barn opened. The blacksmith stepped out to see what the commotion was. Dana clipped him a short quick blow over the jaw and they jumped around his sagging body to enter the smoky barn. There should have been ponies there normally, but the blacksmith had just opened up after the trial. There were no animals waiting to be shod. They hurried out the front end of the place onto another street; turned down in the direction of the main road.

"Here, Maury! This way—quick!" It was what looked like a cart track into the yard beside a log-pole store. But it dropped down in the rear between flanking trees to become a lane slanting away from the main street and uphill toward the old section of the town.

"There they go! Git the damn pelicans!" It was a rider, followed by another, who'd slammed out at the corner of the road on which the boarding house stood. Keene hadn't missed a bet, and his men were like wolves scenting blood. For he'd promised that thousand-dollar reward

to the man who got "that damn dog who killed Dana Rank."

DANA and Maury couldn't go far along the lane. If they had, there'd have been a good bet of picking up a couple of ponies. But the pursuit was closing too fast. Their only hope was to dodge and twist. Dana tried to work away from the main road for the alarm was out. The whole town seemed to be seething and roaring like some great roused animal.

Leaving the lane, they struck for a barn. But a man leaned from a nearby second-story window and let go at them with a double-barrelled shotgun, forcing them to veer off into a little clump of cottonwoods. Panting, Maury stumbling on his twisted ankle, they kept angling. For a brief space, it seemed as if they were leaving the pursuit behind. Dana was thinking of the stretch of brush and sandhills off to the northwest of the town. They hurried among some hovels into an alley, turned up toward the mouth of it.

Half a dozen gunmen appeared up at the mouth in the shade of a big eucalyptus. Dana started to retreat with the kid. Dana's gun cracked and a man up there went down. Behind him, in shirt sleeves and roaring like hell, was revealed Will Keene himself. Dana went berserk then, leaping forward, heedless of the storm of lead sweeping around him. He yelled Keene's name, and a curse. Then he went to a knee to steady himself and triggered with deadly deliberation. Twice. Three times.

A man staggered sideward with a red patch blossoming on his shirt front. A vagrant gust of wind swept a shield of dust over the whole scene. It cleared and Dana searched with powder-stung eyes. The hit man wasn't Keene. Dana saw Keene just as he ducked behind a boulder. From the left, a man leaped out of the dust at Dana. The latter clubbed him down. Then he had to retreat.

The alley ran into a dead end. In the excitement of flight, Dana had forgotten that. One of his guns clicked empty. But Maury, in the rear, fired steadily to cover Dana. They worked backward. There was no rush then. Keene's gun slicks knew they had them pinned down at last. And then Maury was shouting through the racket. They were cornered. The alley straggled down to a low bluff formed by an escarpment of rock. There was nowhere to go.

THE TWO instinctively ducked into a tumbling-down dobie brick hovel over to the left. Its roof was gone and the crumbling entrance had no door. The windows were empty gaps too. The place was a sieve. Dana made his decision quickly as the firing fell off. Keene's men were fanning out and working in for the finishing blow. Wiping a spider web from his face, Dana stepped back into the doorway, bellowed, and tossed his still-smoking guns out into plain sight.

"We surrender! We surrender!" he called. For himself, he would have fought to the bloody fatal finish. But there was the button, Maury. And, too, Dana felt he had gotten the kid into this tight. Another thought had entered his head too. Right here in the heart of town, Keene couldn't string up a prisoner without some semblance of a trial. And that would give him, Dana, a chance to talk. To talk and shout the truth, that Dana Rank still lived. It would cast suspicion on Keene, make people wonder.

Two trigger slammers came out of the weeds across the road and walked toward Dana. Dana calmly crossed his arms on his big chest and leaned against the door frame with that devilish grin.

"Too hot to keep on fighting," he said negligently. One of the men advancing cautiously spat in the dust. The second one moved over to the right. A third gent came along beside a pile of rubble from the left, all with guns levelled and cocked.

"Don't, Dana! We can—" called Maury from inside as he frantically reloaded.

Then Dana sensed it. It was something in the eyes of the three. It was death. It was reflected in

the glassy set look of them. They were not taking him prisoner. Keene had offered the thousand for "that dog—dead—only if he's dead, by Gawd!" They were going to—

His shirt was torn open anyway. Dana plucked for the .32 in the shoulder rig under his left armpit as he dropped to both knees. And a bullet droned where his head would be. He sent a slug into the brain of the man who had fired it, broke the gun arm of the second one, then rocked back inside the hovel. The third man's lead chunk dobie from the doorway as he turned and fled.

It was merely postponing death by a matter of minutes, Dana knew. There were only a few slugs remaining in his cartridge belt. Maury had a bleeding gash over one eye where he had fallen in their flight. And Keene's gun slicks would be forming a chain to lock them against the little bluff.

"They got to come and get us," said Maury grimly.

Dana nodded. "That was a danged light breakfast we had, come to think of it."

"Uh huh. And the java wasn't hot." The button had nerve.

THERE was silence, a bad, evil silence like something gathering itself for a crash. Dana thought he caught Keene's voice once in the hush. Hoofbeats stung the stillness as if somebody were rattling a tight-stretched drum in a frenzy. Shouts. "Hey, what the devil is—" Two gun cracks cut it off. Slapping his sombrero onto his back, Dana worked his head out the door. Half a score of pistols hammered away then. And a bunch of horsemen were cracking into the mouth of the alley, riding Billy-be-damned. He glimpsed Hawes' funeral face through a swirl of powder smoke. And beside him, firing from the saddle, Andy Beaker.

It was the bunch, the Broken Band. When neither Dana nor Maury had returned a couple of hours before dawn, they'd held a council, decided to go after them. And Hawes had the hunch they'd lit out for Union.

Now they cracked the Keene ring. Bald Samson Toby was there, strengthening the outfit with himself and the four men he'd brought along. Some of them drove into the alley while the others milled up at the head. Taken by surprise, Keene's gunmen gave way, heading pell mell for cover. Dana and Maury emerged from the dobie and the riders hedged them in as they pushed back to the head of the alley. Hawes had even thought to bring along extra ponies just in case.

Inside of another minute, Dana and the button were in the saddle. The bunch was slamming up the side road and around a meeting house to head for the open country beyond the town. A couple of wild futile shots sang after them. A mile northward, they crossed the creek and rode into a stand of trees. Unconsciously Dana took command.

"They'll be organizing half the town to hit our trail. . . .We better break up, scatter. Each man make his own way back to the Hole. Then they'll have a bunch of trails to figure out."

"That's right," agreed Hawes.

"Don't ride direct to the camp," Dana added. "And if you find you're followed, don't go to the camp. You'll give the whole outfit away then. . . . Look out for Maury," he added to Beaker sotto voce. The kid's pride would have been hurt if he'd heard anybody being detailed to ride herd on him.

ALONE, inside of a few miles, Dana found he was being trailed. Confident he could shake them off, it worried him little as he cut into an arroyo. Later, after he had worked up a shelf on one side, he spotted the manhunters. There were four of them. He looped over to the east, turned downstream in the waters of a creek instead of up it toward the north end of the valley. Leaving the creek after a few miles, he forked westward and then to the north up a gulch. They should be well off to his right, the east, and steadily moving further away. Two hours later he saw them top a swell of the prairie behind him. It seemed

impossible, locoed, a mirage. There were six of them now.

It was right after that his cayuse went lame. It was difficult for the animal to travel at much more than a lope. He worked up a razor-backed low ridge, left it to burrow into a strip of mesquite jungle. He turned to the northeast sharply in its cover and led his pony on the run down a dried-up creek bed, swearing at the tracks left in its bottom. There was no wind and the sun glared out of a lead-hued sky like an angry torch.

It was when he pushed into a wooded slope further northward, after hurrying across a bare little hollow, that he heard the shots. There were two quick ones, then another pair more widely spaced. Signal shots. Looking out from the trees, he saw the puffs of rifle smoke from a knoll off westward, then made out the small figures that were horsemen. Two of them. The net was closing in on him, and the dun cayuse had to be spurred steadily into more than a walk.

A strange irrational rage welled slowly in his heart. It just wasn't right that he had lived through the melee in Union Hill to die out here. It didn't make sense. The Lord, he told himself, couldn't deal it that way. If his pony hadn't gone lame. . . .And how that bunch had picked up his trail again after he had doubled back southward from the creek. . . . Hell, it just plumb didn't make sense.

But they were closing in, and the cayuse was getting weaker. Inside of another two miles through the timber, he could catch the dull thud of ponies in pursuit. It was the bunch that had been on his tail and caught the signal of the shots. He couldn't keep out of sight much longer. He made his decision abruptly as the cayuse wobbled over the soft ground near a seep spring. Beyond was a flat strip of outcropping rock. Dana dismounted on it after swinging the horse's head upslope toward a natural aisle in the trees.

A sharp blow over the rump and the pony was digging up hill, glad to be rid of the burden of the rider. Dana turned and dived into a thicket and headed down the slope. There was a thin chance they'd follow the pony's tracks without too close inspection. It would be a little spell before they overtook the empty-saddled horse. He threw a glance at the sky and grimly wished it was a couple of hours nearer nightfall.

THE timber ended. A few hundred yards on, beside a white strip of range trail, stood a compact little building with a red-painted roof. After a moment he realized it was the school-house. Off to his right, a little creek from the slope angled down to it. The water came a little over his boot tops when he stepped into it. But the grass on either bank was what interested him. It was high enough to screen him completely. He stepped from the water down by an outbuilding behind the schoolhouse.

It was a one-room affair, and a window in the rear gave him a view of the interior. It seemed empty; the pupil had left. He licked dry lips. At least it would be a place to make a stand.

"I can't die," he heard himself muttering. "I can't die—not till I've settled with Keene! Not till. . . ." Then he was at the door to one side of a rear corner. The door was unlocked which surprised him. Easing into a short hallway, he opened the second door. It gave onto the schoolroom itself. The place had a deserted feeling. His eyes blinked rapidly, half blind, in the dimness after the searing glare of the sun.

He stepped inside and turned to bolt the door after him. The next instant he had dropped to all fours behind one of the front desks. Two people were there, standing down near the front door. The schoolmarm and a man.

"Well, Miss Elvira, I'll be bidding you good day."

Dana, hat removed, peered around the edge of the desk, a Colts in his right hand. He was right. The stocky man with the floppy black hair was Black Pete Venzan himself. His old outlaw hired catspaw. Venzan's back was to him now as he pre-

pared to go. But Elvira Hill, the teacher, was facing his way. And as he guessed, she had seen him before. For right now her big brown eyes flickered to the spot where he was peering out. She saw him again.

Then she was smiling at Venzan as she withdrew the hand he had been holding overlong. "I hope you'll drop in again, Mr. Peters. . . ."

Dana waited, cocking his gun. Waited for her to cry out or give Venzan some warning. She did neither. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

AFTER a moment, Venzan went out, spurs rattling on the front steps. Dana risked another look. The teacher had closed the door and gone to a window to watch Venzan's departure. After a couple of minutes, she said:

"You can come out now. . . .He's moving down the road."

Dana rose from behind the desk and she turned to face him and calmly approached. Dana couldn't understand. She was unarmed and he must have looked like any other wanted man. After all, she couldn't know him. Right in Union Hill, nobody had spotted him with his spike of black beard as Dana Rank.

"School's over for the day," she said with a smile.

The weary Dana grinned back. She was a spunky one, all right. "It's a little late in life for me to be taking the three 'R's'. . . .But I apologize for interrupting your tryst, ma'm."

"Tryst? Well, hardly. . . .Mr. Peters just stops in occasionally when he is passing by."

"Peters?. Ma'm, that man is Black Pete Venzan the outlaw! And one danged snake in the bargain."

She frowned. "I'm certain you're mistaken. He is a very charming man— a gentleman." The brown eyes turned dreamy.

Dana wanted to curse. He had heard before of Venzan's way with the ladies. Venzan was far from handsome, stocky, and sloppy in his person. But something about his cockiness seemed to fascinate women.

"A sidewinder can hiss soft too, ma'm."

Closer, she eyed him icily. "And just how do *you* know so much about him? Who are you, anyway?"

DANA felt the old arrogance coming to the fore, but he forced it down, realizing he was in a tight spot. He didn't want to antagonize her. "Joe Dana's the handle, ma'm. And right now, I'm a fugitive. Some gents from Union Hill are craving to make a cottonwood apple out of me."

"A—a cottonwood apple?"

"That's what they call a gent who is decorating a cottonwood tree—at the end of a rope."

A little shudder ran through her. "What did you do that they want to hang you?"

He sleeved his powder-grimed face, shrugged casually. "Oh, just stopped Keene and his Slash-R pack from executing a poor devil who tried to buck that Dana Rank once."

There was an impish sparkle in her big eyes as she moved over to sit behind her own desk at the head of the classroom. Then it was gone. "That Dana Rank was a black devil," she said gravely. "Wasn't he. . . .I would have hated him if I had been here when he ruled the Valley. A worthless, heartless murderer—that's what he must have been! Somebody should have shot him in the back—and that would have been much too good for that beast!"

Dana felt himself coloring. "Rank, he made mistakes. He was land crazy, I guess. He—he was wrong; no question of it. . . .But—well, there were excuses, certain circumstances."

"Yes, of course. Other men wanted to run brands in this valley. Wicked of them, wasn't it?" Her sarcasm was like a lash.

He sucked air hard through quivering nostrils.

"An arrant coward, too! Elvira Hill went on. "A coward! He hired other men to do his shooting for him —even that outlaw, the man you say is Venzan. Oh, Mr. Dana Rank was really a *great* man, wasn't he?"

His hands knotted at his sides. "Maybe he would have tried to make

amends—if he had lived," Dana got out.

"Do you think so?"

"I could *swear* to it!" He bit his tongue the next moment. But the remark didn't seem to rouse her suspicion. "I and some others are trying to break Keene's power now; he's as bad as Dana Rank ever was." He didn't know why he told her that. Dimly he sensed he wanted to appear well in this woman's eyes.

Her eyes jerked by him, then jerked wide with alarm in the shadowy light of the schoolroom. "Mr. Peters—Venzan—he's coming back," she said in a hushed voice. "He's got some men with him." She shot out a hand and grabbed his wrist as it tightened over his holster top. "Don't! You couldn't stand them off alone. Here! Here!"

THEIR BOOTS were already coming up the steps. From out in the back, a man coughed clearly. They had the place hemmed in. Dropping low as he whipped out a Colts, Dana had already turned toward the door at the rear corner. In turning, he brushed a stack of papers from the desk. They fluttered around his boots and he glanced at them without thinking. They were drawings, he saw, pencil sketches of young ones. Pupils, he guessed. One was a tousled head bent over a desk, nibbling on a pen holder end as he tried to puzzle out a problem. Another was of a gawky girl with pigtails, a full-length standing picture, as she read from a textbook. The child's angelic smile almost had him smiling back despite the tension of the moment. Unconsciously he realized they were startlingly lifelike.

His trap-sharp brain was clicking, telling him he had to get outside before the lead-swapping started. It wouldn't do to let this girl get involved in the shooting melee. Out that back door with his weapons frothing smoke in one do-or-die rush—

"Here!" Elvira said again quickly. She was motioning to the cut-in opening of the desk behind which she sat. To the space where one's legs were supposed to fit. "In there—quickly! Quickly! They'll never know you are here."

In another moment he was on his knees and fitting himself into the rectangular space beneath the desk and between the sets of drawers on either side. The front door opened with a bang. Simultaneously Elvira Hill moved her chair closer to the desk, one of her trim-shod feet touching Dana's side. He could see her bent over the desk as if at work. The next moment the rear door squeaked on its hinges too.

"Ma'm, we're looking for a man!" the gent entering at the rear called roughly. "A killer, a wanted gent. We tracked him right close to here and—"

"This is a school-house," the teacher said frigidly. "I don't make a practice of hiding fugitives. So I must ask you to leave—now."

The man guffawed. "Aw—go spit in a crick!" The man in the rear said insolently. There was something familiar to Dana about his drawl.

Then Venzan himself called from the front end of the school room. "Stop pointing that gun at the lady, ya trigger-slamming jughead. . . Pardon us, Miss Hill. But a fugitive was tracked right close to here. It don't hardly seem possible—"

"'*Doesn't*' seem possible, Mr. Peters," Elvira corrected him with a serene smile.

"It—uh—it doesn't seem possible he's far off. He ain't got a horse no more. So we figgered mebbe—"

"I understand, Mr. Peters. Look wherever you please. Of course, if an outlaw walked in here, I—well, I guess I'd simply swoon! That is—after I shrieked."

THE HIDDEN Dana heard Venzan's laugh. There were the sounds of them poking around, the door of a closet being opened. A boot stepped onto the platform where the teacher sat. Dana could see it.

"Perhaps you'd like to inspect the inkwell, sir," the girl said.

Other men in the room laughed. Venzan growled a curse at one who'd

"Perhaps you would like to inspect the inkwell, sir," said Elvira. "He may be hiding there."

just fired up a quirly and ordered him to put it out. He asked if there was a cellar under the place.

"It's been kept a secret from me, if there is. . . But perhaps you'd like to look in the stove!" Beneath the desk, Dana wanted to chuckle. The filly sure had a tongue sharper than barbed wire.

Again Venzan apologized as he ordered his men out. The floor ceased to creak under their boots. From outside, a voice carried, "He must uh gone north. . . " And then there was the drum of hoofs going away.

Elvira Hill rose with a little sigh and Dana came out from the desk. They faced each other, standing close in the golden-gray waning light of the schoolroom. The huskiness of his voice surprised himself.

"You're mighty nervy, miss. There aren't words—well, they just never made them, I reckon—to thank you." His smile faded as he towered over her, the gray eyes narrowing. "Only

I don't know why you did it or—"

She had dropped a hand, unconsciously apparently, on his powerful wrist. It was then the hinges of the rear door creaked furtively.

"Howdy, ma'm. Came back to keep you company." It was the drawling-voiced man of before. And Dana recognized him as the dangerous killer, Latigo Patrick.

In that light, Latigo did not see him at first. Latigo had eyes for the woman anyway, eyes glittering with a nasty light. And it wasn't the killer light either, though it promised as much violence.

Elvira smoothed back her russet-brown hair as she stepped before Dana to screen him. "What do you want now?"

Latigo guffawed as he shuffled forward, big hands working. "Same thing I wanted when I was here afore. You! . . . . We're all alone now. Nobody to bother us. So we can have a nice long talk and—" And then he realized the girl wasn't alone.

DANA SPRANG even as he yanked a gun, but he didn't dare shoot with it. The report would bring Venzan and the others swarming back. And what that would mean to Elvira Hill, outside of himself. . . He swung the weapon in a savage arc but the retreating Latigo took the blow on the forearm. Latigo dug for a gun with his other hand, moving backward.

Dana kept on top of him, charging in bullishly. He caught Latigo with a terrific butt with his head in the chest. The big gunman flew backward through the door. His gun was half drawn. Then it flew away as his elbow hit the side of the doorway. The two of them rushed out into the dusk. Dana tripped. Latigo drove a boot up into his belly. As Dana tottered in agony, he lost his second Colts, that he had just pulled, as well as his first.

In desperation, Dana dove at his feet. Both men went down, rolling in the grass. Dana grappled blindly, ripped Latigo's shirt, caught at his shell belt. As Latigo wrenched away, the belt came free and dropped in the brush with his other gun. Latigo nailed Dana with two fierce blows to the head and they locked, twisting and stumbling into the clump of scrawny cottonwoods beside the schoolhouse yard.

A KNIFE flashed in Latigo's hand before the trees swallowed them. After that there was nothing but their panting and the thrash of their boots as they struggled. Once there was a short-cut yelp from Latigo as Dana's thumb gouged his eyeball. A minute passed. Dana came flying out to thud down just beside the trees. In the gathering gloom, Latigo loomed to lash out with a boot at Dana's head. At the last instant, Dana rolled away. He came up and his charge carried both of them back into the screen of trees.

Latigo Patrick cursed once in a pain-choked voice that was slowly pinched off. It sounded like a man calling from the bottom of a well somebody was slowly covering at the top. Dana's fingers vised deeper into Latigo's windpipe. It was very silent. Then a body went down slowly and heavily with a finality.

After what seemed endless moments, bloody-faced Dana reeled from the cottonwood clump. He got Latigo's horse and reentered the trees. A little later he led the loaded pony up the slope back toward the timber. He had hooked Latigo's belt around the saddle horn to hold him in the kak. Dana cut the pony and sent the animal trotting off into the night. He could have used the horse for his own escape. But he wanted the body found as far from the schoolhouse as possible to put Elvira Hill in the clear.

When he came back down, she was standing in the rear doorway where she had been all the time. She didn't look as if she would faint. And her voice was level and steady.

"You—you killed him, Dana?"

At the moment he didn't notice how she had addressed him by the name he had given as his surname. Spoken to him as if it were his first name. "Yes," he said.

"Good," was her calm answer. "His breed are better—that way."

He remembered something then. The night they had gone to the Toby place for Beaker to see the men who'd hired him to come into the Valley. It had been Elvira, this girl, who had opened the door at the back of the hall in the house. The light coming from that door had showed them the gunmen lurking in the hall, had saved their lives. He asked her about it.

"Yes," she said. "I thought the light might reveal them. It was the only thing I could do." She explained she had been visiting there at the Sombrero-T with Aunt Hannah Renner. She boarded at the Renner place down the road a piece. "Samson Toby had no choice, Dana. Those Slash-R men had taken George Toby, the crippled brother, as hostage."

"Here. . . . You shouldn't be alone here without some protection." He passed her the double-barrelled derringer he had taken from his boot top. Their hands touched as she accepted it. He knew then, knew it as he had never known anything in his life before. Lucinda Hemley meant nothing anymore.

THERE WAS the rattle of wheels down the road. It was one of the Renner boys coming for her in the ranch wagon. He was very late today.

Dana stood close beside her as she adjusted her hat in the half dark schoolroom. The smell of chalk was strangely at odds with the violence that had just gone before. He said:—

"Maybe, madam, some day I'll see you again and—"

"Don't be silly," she said very matter-of-factly. "Just what chance would you have wandering around the country without a pony. Wait. I'll speak to Roy."

A few minutes later, at her instructions, Dana darted out from the schoolhouse in the twilight, ran down beside the side fence, and slid into the back of the wagon. Roy quickly threw a smelly piece of tarpaulin over him. He heard the girl climbing up onto the seat. Just before the team started away, a hand dropped on the tarp over his shoulder. And he knew she was leaning back close to him. Her voice came.

"No matter what else they say about you, Mr. Dana, you are a very brave man. . . I like brave men. . . "

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN HE rode into the hideout later that night on a cayuse from the Renner place, he practically got an ovation. Maury had told them the hand he had played in staying sentences against Gene Selvin. The bunch had a new faith in him. Even dour Hawes looked sanguine for once in the firelight. They had all come in safely, Pop Moss arriving a short spell ago with a shoulder scratch as a memento of a moment when one of the Slash-T packs got too close.

They were jubilant, passing around a jug of redeye Andy Beaker had brought in. Dana stood drawing on a quirly in his mashed lips, rubbing his spike of beard. Come morning, he decided, he would shave it off. Too many folks in Union Hill had seen him wearing it.

"Don't blow your tops, boys," he said gravely. "We won that time. But it was just a skirmish."

"All Union Hill saw Keene and his pack git whupped!" one man put in.

"Sure. But Will Keene knows he's in a showdown fight now. He knows if he is to remain boss of the valley he has to break us, run us out—those he doesn't plant in six feet of ground. And Black Pete Venzan is in on the game now." He told about Venzan being at the schoolhouse. "He and his pack were in on the hunt for us after the thing in town."

That sobered them some. Dana went on to say Venzan would be scouring the valley for their camp. "He's got gunmen—more than we number. He's got Venzan and his pack. He's got to break us. *Got* to!"

Beaker flipped his lucky silver bullet. "Then, what do we do?"

"Avoid a face-to-face showdown with his power! We've got to till we can set the stage like we want it. We keep raiding, keep harassing him,

keep checkmating his moves. . . And right now, for a while, we gotta lay low—damn low."

There was some muttering. Hawes spat into the fire embers. "Dammit, I don't see how we'll ever break the Slash-R."

"We still lay low for the next few days," Dana said grimly.

TWO DAYS passed. On the third day, Hawes slipped out with a couple of men to see what he could learn. Late in the afternoon he returned with word a group of the small ranchers—those who had been trying to form a loose protective association—were holding a meeting that night. It would be down at the Wilson ranch, a two-bit outfit, in a little valley spurring off from the Shotgun.

"They're curious about us," Hawes said. "Coupla the men I spoke to would like us to have reps at the meeting if we wanta come."

It was decided Dana and Andy Beaker would go. They rode out from the sink-hole under a low lemon wafer of moon. The meeting was scheduled for after midnight in case some Slash-R men might be snooping around. The little ranchmen didn't want to be seen heading for the spot in daylight.

"This ain't the way 'cording to that map Hawes made," Beaker protested when Dana led the way into a gulch.

"Short cut," Dana said.

They were challenged by a couple of men with rifles in the scrub growth as they approached the paintless ranchhouse that showed no light. They identified themselves as friends of John Hawes. One of the guards led them in and put their ponies in an old saddle-backing barn. They slipped into the house through the kitchen. In the front room whose windows were well-blanketed nine-ten men sat crowded about the small table where a low-turned lamp burned. Hoglegs lay on the bare table before them. And more than one hand kept clamped on a gun butt even after they were introduced.

A man with a cast in one eye nodded at Beaker's name. "Uh-huh. You're the trouble buster the Toby was bringing in. . . . I saw you over at Burnt Wagon five-six years ago. You've aged some."

But about Dana, presented to them as Joe Dana, they were wary, unconvinced. Mouths hardened on the grim faces around the table. These men had been buggy-whipped too many times by Dana Rank when he bossed the Valley. They were taking their lives in their hands even plotting to stand against the encroaching power of the Slash-R.

"Just how come you happened to buy chips in this game?" one man asked coldly. He had a chip mark from an old bullet scar running up from a sun-bleached eyebrow. Dana remembered him as Matty Powers, a four-square, honest as the day-is-long gent who owned a small outfit to the west of Slash-R land. Dana had made him a cut-price offer on his place a month back.

"He's a sidekick of little Maury Lewes," Beaker put in. "Rank's town marshal down in Elcor slammed his britches in jail there."

"You got a familiar cut, Dana," said another man. "Seems like I seen you afore. . . What're you playing for here in the Shotgun—outside of a skinful of lead?"

DANA MADE a recklessly bold statement. "I happen to be a distant relative of Dana Rank's. Cousin, the way I figure it. Rank himself never exactly admitted the relationship when I worked for him a few years back. Maybe it was then you saw me around."

"Why are you risking your hide bucking the Slash-R now?"

Dana played it boldly again. "Because I think Keene killed my cousin, Dana Rank, and stole the outfit."

It struck the room silent but it was like a piece of dynamite going off none the less. Powers asked him how he knew, what proof he had.

"No proof—yet. But I'm danged sure. I want Will Keene—dead. And before the game's over, I'll prove what I say. . . "

A man reached for the bottle beside the lamp and passed it to Dana.

The ice had been broken. They were convinced, accepting him.

They discussed conditions in the Valley. One of the men reported cut fences and some small rustling. He was pretty certain Venzan's outfit had a hand in it. He had glimpsed one of the raiders in the moonlight.

"The point is they're cutting at that herd I was gitting ready to ship. And I need every dollar I can scrape up. My note comes due the fifteenth of the month, and the bank told me a few days ago they won't give me no extension."

Dana, seated now, stared cold-eyed and thoughtful into a cloud of quirly smoke. "Don't worry too much. If you don't pay, they'll have to go through foreclosure proceedings, then hold a sale on the place."

"You sure say it slick, Joe Dana!" cried Powers. "But talk ain't ridding the valley of Will Keene—and he's as bad as that dirty devil of a Rank ever was!" Powers was fist-thumping the table.

"What's your plan?" asked Dana softly.

"Kill Keene!" snorted Powers.

"A heap easier said than done."

"I got the nerve to try it—even if it costs me my—"

"And what will you gain?" Dana cracked in sharply. "His wife lives. The machinery—the gunhand spread and the dinero and the Law in the pocket of whoever is boss of the Slash-R—all remains."

SOME heads nodded agreement, but others were desperate, backed against the wall. They grumbled. One man talked about a raid on the Slash-R to wipe it out.

"Mebbe, Joe Dana," another man said, "you're a mite shy uh—well, white-livered!" He spat it.

Dana flicked him with the gray eyes. It suddenly struck him. . . .If these men learned his true identity, they would tear him to pieces on the spot and nail his hide to the front fence. "Sure," Dana passed it off though his high temper plunged against the bit, "I was short on nerve, too, when I bucked Keene in Union Hill the other day."

Another man broke the harsh silence. "Well, this ain't solving nothing for Tuss Fearon."

Dana tightened. "What's wrong with—with this Fearon?"

"Going to lose his place, that's all." Powers gave the details. Hard-pressed for money when fire had burnt out his hayland, he had been forced to borrow dinero to tide himself over. Hadn't wanted to go to the bank controlled by Dana Rank. "So he got the dinero from Dan Hobane of The Lucky Lode."

Guilt twisted a horny finger in Dana's heart. Hobane the gambling hell boss was another of his undercover agents. When you got a man into debt, you had him in trouble, already halfway down the skids.

"Fearon couldn't pay when it was due," Powers concluded heavily. "Hobane gave him an extension but made him turn over the deed. Now, Fearon can only pay half. Hobane takes over. And I'll give ten to one, gold agin dobie dollars, that Hobane's tied in with the Slash-R!" Powers ended in a roar.

"Fearon's licked," one of them said in the heavy silence. "None of us've got any dinero or. . . ."

"How much more has Hobane got coming to him?" Dana asked quietly. Shannon said the balance, the due half, was a little less than nine hundred. The pessimisim was thick enough to punch holes in. Dana rose to go. Their good-byes weren't very hearty.

COMING out of the short-cut from the side valley as the gray of dawn washed over the swells of the range, Dana and Beaker were forced to hide out in a clump of alder. Up on a nearby rise on the trail, a band of riders dallied, Slash-R riders beyond a doubt.

"Prob'ly got some word of the meeting and are nosing around," opined Beaker. "Like to cut down on 'em with the carbine just to see if they'd high-tail it, by grab!"

"And maybe catch yourself a piece of lead. Take it easy. I'll need you over at Claybank." When Beaker asked what was building in Claybank,

Dana only shrugged, "You'll see, pard."

After a spell, the horsemen moved off southward. The pair went on. It was when they were crossing Little Bonnet Creek a couple of hours after dawn that Dana remembered the Widow McTigue's store wasn't more than a mile away. He had a craving to go there, vaguely realizing he wanted to see friends associated with his old life even though they didn't know who he was now. As he stretched his legs while the ponies drank, he studied his reflection in the dark water.

The course of events had left its imprint on him. And it was more, deeper than the smashed, crooked nose that had altered his whole appearance. More than the lack of the strip of mustache or the sideburns or the fancy rig. He was leaner, drawn from the rigors of this new life, the big bones of his frame projecting slightly. His mouth was flatter, firmer. In the gray eyes was a bleak glitter, the guarded look of the animal who knows what it is to be hunted.

When they mounted he made the excuse to Beaker he wanted to pick up some things at this store. Mrs. McTigue was out sweeping the front steps when they came warily out of the billowing ground mist. She bid them good morning without recognizing Dana Rank. Inside, Dana bought some cartridges and a sack of Bull and looked over some shirts, dallying.

"I've got a fresh pot of coffee boiling up on the stove if you gentlemen would care for a cup to take the stiffness out of your bones," the widow said. Beaker was all for it.

Dana sniffed the familiar smells and listened to the widow's voice and felt a little ease inside. Strangely, because it was a part of his past, it was like a taste of home to him. And since he had become an outcast, outlawed, with even his woman stolen from him, he had no home, nothing to fill in its place. From the back room came the sleepy voice of Frances McTigue, the blind child.

Beaker said, "Holy hell! Visitors. . . .Sit tight!" And he moved from sight. He had been behind Dana, in the dimness of the rear of the store. He glided back of a flour barrel. From the tail of his eye, Dana could see his drawn hogleg. Then the men were clumping up the steps.

THEY were Slash-R men, no question of it. One of them was Canada Cannell, a gunslinger Dana himself had hired. He recognized the man at his elbow in the van as the hook-nosed spike-chinned bodyguard he'd seen at Will Keene's side on the hotel porch. Belligerence cozed from them as they swaggered in. The front two slapped hands to holsters at sight of Dana. The latter thanked God he and Beaker had the foresight to leave their ponies ground-anchored in the willows down the creek. If the worst happened now, Beaker would be an ace in the hole when the gunplay started.

"What's your handle, pilgrim? Where're you from? And what's your business in these parts?" demanded the hook-nosed one truculently.

Dana looked down at the checked shirts he had been examining before replying. Then he sneered insolently, "Don't see any tin badges on you pelicans? Or maybe you wear 'em on the bottoms of your britches? Name your authority and spit out who you're snooping for—and there'll be a dang sight less trouble!"

The gun toughs were taken aback. Slash-R men were accustomed to have people knuckle down to them. Hook Nose sputtered, "B-by G-gawd, you—you—" lunging forward.

Dana took a stride toward him to come up wide-legged, thumbs hooked in his shell belt. "And you aren't badge packers, I just realize. . . .You there, Canada Cannell, when did you get out of the Big House at Yuma, anyway?" He let his eyes wheel over them contemptuously. "You back there with the red neckerchief! Aren't you Toady Finn, wanted in Socorro for a killing?" The man shifted uncomfortably.

They were taken aback, stunned, thrown off balance mentally. They weren't used to having the attack car-

ried to them even verbally. Cannell swallowed as he tried to glare stonily. The man in the back shifted uneasily. He wasn't Toady Finn. But they had been saddle pards; and his own past was as black as Finn's.

Dana lounged against the counter indolently. "What the devil! You all got your mouths stuffed with rocks all of a sudden? You sure were blatting your heads off a moment ago. Shades of hell, maybe I ought to act scared. . .only I'm not."

Hook Nose spat on the floor. "Waita minute, now. You're calling a heap of names 'round here. Who in blazes do you figger you are to git away with—"

"Colepaugh!. . . .Never heard of me? Well, special officers of the governor's staff aren't supposed to be well known."

"Special officer, huh? Are you—"

"I don't pack no lawman's star, and if you're readying to ask for my papers, you can go spit in your Stetson! I can't be troubled identifying myself to every ragtag gun-sporting scissor bill who pokes in. . . .Anything else you're craving to learn this morning?" His sheer effrontery had them back on their heels and Dana knew it.

Hook Nose temporized till he could be surer of his ground. "Well, we're trying to cut the sign of a pelican who killed Latigo Patrick, one of our spread. We're damn proddy and—"

"Latigo Patrick?" Dana cut him off, voice like a buckskin popper on a bull whip. "I came in here to arrest him—or kill him!"

THE stillness was a heavy thing, ugly, yet alive with the bafflement of the Slash-R pack. They didn't want to be buffaloed. Yet they hadn't figured on tangling with some special officer sent down from the state capital. They were six to his one yet he acted like he held the whip hand, acted like a special State officer would.

Hook Nose worked his under lip up inside his upper one. "Maybe you'd like to take a little pasear up to the Slash-R and talk it over with—" That seemed the solution, a sort of unofficial method of taking him prisoner and finding out. . .

Hesitant but hurrying footsteps came from the rear. It was the blind Frances. "Hello, Mr. Dana Rank! Hello, Dana," she cried in her childish treble. Sightless, she had recognized Dana by his voice. "You haven't been here in a long, long time, Dana Rank."

CHAPTER XX

WIDOW MCTIGUE came after the child and caught her arm. "Stay back, Francie! Stay back, pl-please. That isn't your friend, Dana Rank. You're mistaken, child."

Dana felt as if all the blood in his body had been sucked dry in his pulsing veins. He was certain he must be ashen pale with shock.

"Dana Rank? Haw-haw, that's a good one!" guffawed Hook Nose. "Rank's been dead for weeks. You hear that Colepaugh?"

Dana just casually slicked out a shooting iron and rested it on the thigh hooked up on the counter. "Sure. That's no news to me. As a matter of fact, that was what I was sent into Shotgun Valley to investigate."

Hook Nose and Cannell looked greatly relieved. Actually, something in the bleak depths of this man with the flattened nose had put a chill in them. None of them wanted any lead-swapping with this devil-be-damned special officer.

"Why in tarnation didn't you say so in the fust place, mister? That puts us both on the same side. Now the boss—"

"I'll be along to see Keene in a day or so."

"But mama, I know that's Mr. Dana. I can still hear him talking and—" Then the door at the back was shut on Frances' protests.

Hook Nose and his bunch chuckled some more over that. Hook Nose said "Colepaugh" looked a heap livelier than any dead man's ghost. They purchased a couple of quarts of redeye and departed. A little later, Dana and Andy Beaker rode off in the

drifting rain-shot haze that had settled over the prairie. After a couple of miles, Beaker slowed to a walk and spoke.

"Folks call me a gunfighter," he led off, apropos of nothing. "Ain't quite accurate. I'm a plain hard-headed business man and guns just happen to be my tools. Uh-huh."

Dana threw him a look and said they could ride faster.

Beaker seemed deaf. Seemed to be musing aloud as he continued. "Yep, a business man. Just that—and nothing else. Don't aim to be a danged hero. Boothill is filled with heroes. I just aim to stay alive and take care of yours truly."

Dana scowled, smelling skunk sweat. "What're you driving at, Beaker?"

"Well, I'm down here helping to clean up Shotgun Valley—and get back the Slash-R for you." He had halted his pony and sat easily with a leg hooked around the horn. His right hand was stuck in his side coat pocket.

"What?"

"Sure. And I figure I should git paid for the job, Mr. Dana Rank of the Slash-R an' former big potato of the Valley!"

"You're locoed." Dana summoned a grin.

"The blind child back at the store was right, Rank. I reckon something happened to your face to change your looks. Your nose has been busted, of course, but a man's voice don't change at your age. The blind girl wasn't fooled, Rank."

"Can't help it if a girl thinks my voice is like that—"

BEAKER expectorated a nasty word. "It fits in like a peg in a hole, Rank. You know too many things—like knowing that Canada Cannell, and the short cut last night. And the set-up between Judge Haines and that dancehall skirt. . . . And how Brane, the deputy, hadn't been in these parts long. Uh-huh. You're Dana Rank, mister." There was an unpleasant note beneath his tones.

"All right. What?"

"Five thousand, Rank. My fee."

Dana fought down the cold rage. "I have no dinero now. I have nothing, in fact. And—you can go to hell!" Even as he flung the words he remembered when it was his custom to hire trigger slammers regularly.

Beaker went, "Tch! Tch Don't be two-bit size, Rank; you never was small bore. You're using the band—including me—to git back the Slash-R that Will Keene managed to rob you of. So-o—"

"That's a damn, dirty lie!" Dana itched to get his hands at the man's windpipe. He was sincere in what he said, too. "I mean to clean up the Valley and give back what I took—"

"Who the hell in the bunch will believe that when I tell them you are Dana Rank? That you've been lying to 'em about your identity. . . .And how you're using 'em. . . .Aw, have some sense, man!"

Dana Rank was over a barrel and knew it then. Everything would be ruined if Beaker told the bunch who he was.

"Don't make no gunplay, Rank. My dewclaw's on a derringer in my pocket right now."

Dana bowed his head finally, nodding. Beaker laid down the terms. Soon as they hit a place where there was paper and ink, Dana could draw up a check and make it out to him, Andrew Beaker.

"You got money in the bank. When you're back in the saddle, the check'll be good. And now I got a motive to see you git back in the saddle, Rank." He picked up the reins and clucked to his pony. "Whillikins, I'm half-starved. Doing a good stroke of business always gives me one hell of an appetite."

Their eyes met and clashed coldly once before they broke into a lope. Dana knew the thing between them wasn't a closed matter. Not yet. He was determined it wasn't. . . .

BY DINT of hard riding, they made the town of Claybank to the west of Union Hill a couple of hours after nightfall. Dana himself, and five others, including Beaker and

little Maury. They drew up on a wooded knoll outside the small trail town.

"We're holding up this pueblo," Dana announced his plans for the first time.

"Pretty small place. The pickings won't be too big," said Beaker. The eyes of those two locked again. On the way over, Beaker had told Dana he had let one man of the bunch in on the secret of Dana's identity. "So if *anything* should happen to me, just in case," he had added significantly.

"That's an advantage," Dana answered. "We won't have to worry about much opposition on the getaway. As for pickings—we don't need much. Nine hundred. That's what Fearon owes that snake of a Hobane."

John Hawes whistled softly. Dana talked a few moments, outlining things. Then they rode down in, breaking up. As he had for miles, Dana speculated who the man was Beaker had picked out to share the secret with. Then he swung his mind back to the business at hand. Beaker and another man, going down the street first, entered the town's main barroom, The Sagebrush Rest. A couple of the others came along the road from the other way and went into the Rest too. Dana finally left his own pony under a tree down the road and pushed open the batwings after the others of his bunch had preceded him.

There were a dozen customers in the place beside the members of the band. Dana went down to the very end of the bar counter and asked for the boss. A fat bald man got up from a table in the back and came over.

"Just got a tip," Dana told him in a hoarse whisper fraught with melodrama. "There's going to be a hold-up. Black Pete Venzan and his pelicans are just down the road. . . .If you got any housemen, why—"

The boss went a dirty white, took the hint fast. He called to a man back at the table, stuck his head into a room and summoned another houseman. He got two men down from the bar. "Now," he said, as he and the others bunched around Dana, "tell us all about it."

"Well, it's this way. See?" And Dana brought up the Colts he had masked with his sombrero. "This is the hold-up. . . .And my pards have got you covered from the other side. Be sensible and see another sunrise."

THE OTHER five had jumped back clear of the bar and upped their hardware to cover the whole place. Resistance would have been ridiculous. The barkeep made a sort of sucking noise as if something was stuck in his throat. Hawes and Maury moved around quickly, relieving everybody of their gun irons. Beaker had wheeled to stand watch just inside the door. It went off as slick as grease.

Dana got the dinero from the till behind the bar, then relieved the customers of their cash. "More," he said sharply to the boss after sneering at the twenty-odd dollars the latter had surrendered. "You run some right fancy stud games here some nights. . . Oh, you want to be stubborn, eh." He snapped the end of his gun barrel sharply against the boss' jaw, enough to hint at more.

"All right." The boss led the way into the back room, moved a loose floorboard in a corner and brought up a cigar box. There was a little over five hundred in that when it was counted on the bar as Dana ordered. He had the rest counted too. That totalled one hundred and forty.

"Hell, what a bunch of pikers!" snapped Dana as he shoved it into a sack. "Sixty-fifty-eight. All right." He drew out a sheet of paper already bearing some writing, filled a blank with some figures, folded it, and slid it under a bottle. "You can read this after we leave—leave town!"

Leaving Beaker and another to stand guard, Dana led the rest down the street to the stage line depot. There was just the station agent and a couple of cronies there, poring over a checker board.

"We need some money sort of badly," Dana said languidly. He popped his gun on them and the grins died a-borning on their faces. They got a

hundred and eighty-seven there including funds of the stage company. Again Dana made some figures on a written sheet and left it behind with the same instructions. John Hawes was left behind there to keep them hushed. The next stop was the hay and feed store that was just closing.

"I want fifty-five dollars—pronto," he stated on entering. The proprietor started to grin, then almost lost his spectacles as he gulped with shock when Dana tucked the business end of a Colts into his belly. The man had sixty dollars. Dana returned five to him and left another sheet to be opened after their departure. Maury stood guard at the hay store while Dana and the other man went to round up the ponies.

Dana gave a piercing whistle. The man on guard at the three places busted out into the road. Dana slapped a few slugs into the building fronts just to discourage any retaliating snipers. They hit the saddle leather and busted the breeze out. A rifle shot spanged from a window over The Sagebrush Rest. Maury jerked in the kak and gave a yelp. He had a shallow cut in the flesh of the top of his left shoulder. It didn't seem serious then.

En route back to camp he turned over the dinero to Hawes. Hawes left the bunch to put it in hands that would see it reached Fearon.

BALD Samson Toby was critical back at the sinkhole hideout. "Sure, we topped Keene's card on that play. In a matter of years, we might force him to pull in his horns and quit. But some of us mightn't live that long." He sucked noisily on his cold pipe. "We oughta take a gamble and hit Keene where he lives. The Slash-R ranch, I mean."

"What would we gain by that?" Dana asked wearily, eyeing Andy Beaker through the steam puffing up from the coffee pot.

"If we grabbed off his wife as a hostage, we could make Keene swally our terms, I'll bet!"

"No. Not a chance. Keene wouldn't." He really knew Will Keene now, and Keene had always been a cold-blooded one. Then he became conscious of the eyes of the others on him, questioning eyes, wondering how he could be so plumb sure. He shrugged. "Every time Keene loses a hand to us, he loses a heap of strength in the Valley. Other men see he can be checked. Sooner or later, Keene's got to take the gamble. Then. . . ." He stood up.

Hunkered across the fire, Beaker regarded him with cold amusement, slowly lowered one eyelid in a knowing wink. Dana's lips tightened against his teeth. He wondered who in blazes Beaker had imparted the secret to. It kept twisting inside him.

"We could burn out the Slash-R ranch for one thing," another man picked up the thread of Toby's argument.

"Would that break Will Keene—with all the dinero he's got behind him?" Dana asked logically. Silence was his only answer. They were proddy. Beaker laughed, apparently at nothing. Dana knew what he was thinking. Thinking he was loathe to sack the Slash-R rancho because, actually, it belonged to him. Dana knew, no matter how things went in Shotgun, some day he and Andy Beaker would have a showdown. And Beaker was a crack gunman.

CHAPTER XXI

IT WAS A couple of days later that he met Elvira Hill as she rode from school in the ranch wagon with Roy. Intercepted her, would have been more exact. Without admitting to himself why, he felt he wanted to see her again. He'd been waiting half an hour in a little bosque beside the road when the wagon came along. She greeted him with a slow warm smile and frank pleasure in her brown level eyes.

Roy got down and went to the head of the team, pretending he had to do something with a bit. She grew more reserved.

"Isn't it perilous for you to appear here—on the open range—in daylight, Mr. Dana?" she asked.

He darkened slightly. "I didn't mean to endanger you!"

"I meant for yourself." They talked a little. He felt his spirits rising as he followed the movement of her lips, the proud toss of her head. Then he felt depressed again. He was outlawed, a homeless gun maverick. And the Lord alone knew when he would be anything more than that. You couldn't offer that to any woman.

Her voice had dropped cautiously. "Venzan visited the schoolhouse again today."

"Are you trying to make me jealous?" But he realized he was. "You should order him off. You know he is Venzan now, a killer and an outlaw and—"

"They call you an outlaw, Dana." She laughed at his quick flush, then grew grave again. "He seems very certain of finding where the band camps out, Dana. Maybe—maybe you should leave the Valley for a while. Venzan was—well, he was as confident as a man on the threshold of a discovery."

Dana's features set in a mask. "When I leave this valley I'll have to be toted out feet first."

Pain seemed to make her face wince a moment. "All the shooting and bloodshed. . . .there should be some other way to run a range."

"There will be when I—" He was about to say when he got back his birthright. He pinched out his quirly hard. Roy lifted his head and the punch of a distant horse's hoofs came down on the soft breeze.

Elvira leaned closer to Dana from the seat, putting a hand quickly on his arm. His face relaxed in a grin when he saw the ink stains on two fingers. "Everybody is talking about the raid on Claybank—and how Mr. Fearon miraculously got the money to settle his note. That was fine. Whoever did it. . . ." The brown eyes twinkled. "And the notes—the I. O. U.'s—left at each place to cover the money taken. They say they were signed with Dana Rank's name."

THE BOY said they had to be getting along. He knew Dana rode with the bunch bucking the Slash-R though he did not know his true identity. Dana impulsively caught Elvira's hand briefly before the wagon rattled off. Her fingers twined about his. Riding back to the hideout he mused on that and on her final words about the notes signed "Dana Rank." He had given out those notes from pure honesty, to escape the charge of his own conscience that he was stealing. He had done enough of that in the years before. Somehow, she seemed to know those signatures were not forgeries.

"That's locoed. How could she know?" he asked himself aloud. When he rode into the camp, John Hawes had already brought back word of it too.

They thought it was a great joke. Funny as all git-out. "Now folks'll be wondering if that dirty polecat of a Rank is really dead," one of them said. "Haw-haw! That'll weaken Keene's position too. They'll be wondering if he really stole the Slash-R."

"Yeah, it's funny," Dana agreed and looked down quickly at the gun he was cleaning. Maury, arm in a sling as a result of the bullet rip in his shoulder, was watching him. And Andy Beaker had a knowing you-and-I-know look in his eyes. Dana's hands trembled over the weapon on which he worked.

There was a sharp challenge from Pop Moss on guard at the entrance to the crater hole. A few moments later a rider came in, hands hoisted over his head. John Hawes knew the horseman. He was Matty Powers' foreman.

"Keene is going to hit Toby's Sombrero-T tonight. Going to run off every danged last cow critter and wipe out the Tobys." The news had come through Fearon. An orey-eyed hairpin, who claimed he had been fired from the Slash-R, had told Fearon.

They talked it over. Apparently Will Keene was going to lash back, to strike a big blow, the first of many to smash those opposing him.

"He can go to hell!" old Samson Toby cried harshly. "He can't hurt me no more. My crippled brother and young Lynn, they're safe outa the Valley now. I gave orders to the men left at the place to make no resistance if anything happened, just to

save their own hides." But it was a bitter blow to him.

Dana stood up. A grin was on his mouth but savagery licked in the depths of the gray eyes. "This is what we've been waiting for. Keene's been forced to strike. He might run off some Sombrero stuff. But he's going to pay, pay heavily, by grab! We'll have a little reception ready for him and his—"

"We'll leave a heap of Slash-R gunnies dead out there!" snapped Beaker. "This'll be an ambush they won't forget!"

"Dead ones won't help us much," Dana contradicted. "We want prisoners. Prisoners who can talk. . . . who, if they're brought to trial, can testify they're Slash-R men and were ordered by Keene to do that job! Then we could hang the deadwood on Keene and—"

"Trial?" John Hawes scoffed. "Gawd Almighty, you gone off your head, Joe Dana? Keene owns the judge and—"

"If startling enough evidence were put in the governor's hands, he'd have to send in a special judge. . . .Wonder why Keene, though, isn't using Pete Venzan for this job as I would—"

FORTUNATELY nobody overheard him. One of Toby's men was saying it wouldn't be so easy to lay a trap for the Slash-R pelicans. Sombrero land tongued out quite a distance to the northwest.

"That's right," agreed Hawes glumly. "We can't be all over the hull dang range. Might miss 'em completely."

When they left the camp for Toby's place, Maury protested at being left behind to stand guard over the prisoners. But with his left arm out of commission, he would be a liability out there in a gun battle. Pushing northward up the rim of the Shotgun range there was more talk about the chances of missing the Slash-R raiders.

"Holy blazes!" bit off Dana finally. "Do you expect them to send you an invitation with directions on a map and X marking the spot?"

"No-o," said Hawes. "But I know where we can hit 'em without needing no map." He pointed through the twilight toward Old Woman's Butte to the east. Fenceposts were faintly visible just beyond the butte. Slash-R wire. A cart track straggled off over a rise beyond it—straggled toward the ranch itself. "Keene and his men busy up on the Sombrero and. . . ."

Hawes needed to say no more. It was like a lighted match dropped in dried grass. Eyes fired up and hands massaged gun butts anticipately. And Samson Toby applied the bellows to the flames himself.

"That's what I say! Hit the Slash-R itself, by grab!"

That clinched it. "You think Keene's a big enough fool to leave his own front door wide open? You think—" But it was a waste of voice. There was no turning them then. Yet he had a nasty hunch.

Toby pushed his pony off toward the butte, looked around. One after another, the others swung over to join him, all save Dana Rank. "You go without me if you go," he said quietly, hoping to swing the tide. In vain. Toby yipped and they moved off.

"He'll be catching up with us inside of a mile or two," drifted back from the others. Dana probably would have. But when he heard that he turned his pony and spurred back the way they had come. His one hope was that, when he didn't rejoin them, they might abandon the idea. Another thought came to him, a sickening thought. If the raid on the Slash-R came off, Andy Beaker could, might, tell them Dana hadn't come because he didn't want to sack his own place.

HE HAD just turned into the draw leading toward the hideout when he caught the drum of hoofs from the rear. He dropped off and got behind a boulder. Then a cloaked rider came into sight from the pines and he sighted along a gun barrel. Then he was shouting:—

"Elvira! Elvira!"

She reined up fifty feet beyond in the thin moonlight, gazing around

warily. When he stepped into view a derringer glittered in her outstretched hand before she recognized him. She was flushed and breathing hard, the chestnut hair unpinned and flowing over her shoulders.

"Dana. . . .Dana! Something's wrong! I'm not certain—but—but—maybe I'm a fool! But Pete Venzan stopped at the place tonight. He'd had a few drinks. I—I led him on." She rubbed her mouth as if to remove a deep stain. A shudder ran through her.

"Easy, Elly, easy."

She swallowed hard. "He talked, Dana. Not much. He held back something that made him laugh. But he *did* say certain men were going on a wild goose chase up to the Sombrero tonight and that they'd get an 'all-fired' surprise when they got back to where they hang their headpieces. Perhaps it doesn't mean anything, Dana, but—" She trembled, struggling for control.

Dana's swarthy face darkened still more. It meant something all right. Something damned dangerous, he was sure.

"When he left, I saw some men—a whole bunch—join him on the hill out back of the place. They rode east—this way. Roy said you—your bunch were somewhere up in the hills beyond this draw where the big dead pine was. So I came. I wanted. . . ."

He reached up and gripped her arm, face a mask, forcing a smile into his eyes. "Don't worry. I'll go see the men in the camp at Jackson's Hole now." He didn't want her to know that all but Maury were out on the range, riding nowhere as he was now certain.

"I was foolish, wasn't I, Dana?"

"No, darling. No. I think I know what Venzan was driving at. We'll be ready for him. Nothing to worry about. . . ." That was a lie; his heart pinched at the thought of Maury back there alone. Maury could escape, of course. But Maury was a wildhead when the chips were down, a blind-stubborn fighter. "You—you go back now, Elly."

He stood smiling up. She seemed to sway out of the saddle. Then he had an arm around her waist and had pulled her to him and their lips met hard. She gasped once. He felt her lips smiling against his cheek and he pinned them with his own again. When he released her he was shaken as if by some terrific impact.

"Go back now, Elly."

AFTERWARD he should have realized she obeyed too easily. One moment she was looking down at him with an incredible softness. Then she had turned and was leaving the draw. He hit the saddle leather and threw the gut hooks to his cayuse. What Venzan had meant was obvious enough. The wickedest, slickest kind of a trap had been baited. When the band returned, weary and frustrated from the useless trek up to the Sombrero outfit, Venzan's bunch would be in Jackson's Hole to greet them with lead, the last place they'd be expected to be.

In the yellow pine before the corridor through the rock into the Hole, he dismounted and slid forward. It was still as he passed through a moonlight-dyed patch. A night bird twittered in a nearby bush. It was hazy in the passage cutting through the rock. He stepped into it impetuously, thinking of Maury. And he got the blow over the back of the head.

It wasn't enough to beat him unconscious. He was aware of being grabbed, his arms pinned to his sides; of being shoved forward on stumbling legs that seemed no part of his body. There was a shout.

"We got him, Keene! The big potato of the bunch!"

Then he was in the Hole, his senses clearing to the accompaniment of a wild pounding inside his skull. Pale luminance from the moon directly overhead bathed the sink-hole. His blinking eyes picked out Maury first. The button stood a prisoner, arms bound, gun slicks flanking him. Half-dried blood from a scalp gash smeared one side of his face. That and a terrible look of guilt as he saw Dana trapped too. Dana managed a weak wink for him.

"Sure, it's funny as hell, ain't it?" Will Keene stood wide-legged a little off to the right by the coals of the fire. Beside him was Black Pete Venzan with his loose hair falling over one eye.

DANA became aware of the slow run of blood down the back of his neck. The last shreds of the veil cleared from his eyeballs. The bunch of gunmen almost filled the back half of the clearing. Over to the left, two of them weren't standing. They were sprawled in those grotesquely awkward poses that were achieved only in death. Maury Lewes had made a stand, had made it cost them.

The button suddenly spoke up, loudly and hoarsely in an attempt to save Dana's hide. "That two-bit? Him the head of the bunch? Shucks, he's only a danged horse thief who stumbled in the other day an' we—"

"Shut up!" A burly man struck Maury across the mouth.

Dana instinctively rolled forward on his toes as he sought to galvanize his limp body. The gun muzzle in his back jabbed harder.

Keene said, gesturing with his Colts, "I recognize this sidewinder now all right. Sure." He wore a smug sneer, one eyelid arrogantly drooped. He spat and some tobacco juice ran down the front of his yellow silk shirt. "He's the buzzard they had in the cuartel at Elcor—the sonuva who was a-trying to pass himself as the late Dana Rank. Sure." He had beaten Dana to the punch, riddled any claim he might make as to his real identity.

Dana lifted his chin. "Sure! But try to prove it at a trial!" Hate, pure venomous malevolence fired his brain, choked in his throat so he could say little more. His passionate mouth wrenched.

"We're going to save the county the expense of a trial," Keene drawled. "This way!" His gun levered up to point smack at Dana Rank. Moonglow silvered the barrel. The setting was strangely serene for death.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MAN on Dana's right, holding that arm, tried to lean on the arm as his knees buckled. Then he went down suddenly as the gun report bounced off the walls of the sink-hole. Dana ripped free from the gunman on the left as Keene's bullet grooved the top of Dana Rank's skull. As Dana glimpsed the gun muzzle winking fire-flame from the inlet to the Hole, he went headlong. A gunman bellowed in pain as lead from the passage nailed him.

"The bunch is back! They're back! How the hell—"

Dana was crawling on hands and knees, dropping flat from weakness at times, toward the passage. Behind him Keene and his men were stampeding, slamming around to get out of the moonlight, backing into the tunnel of the dried-up creek bed. They were under the illusion that somehow the Broken Band had returned from the Sombrero-T long before expected.

Dana knew that wasn't the case. Whoever was in that passage was no gunman at all. The shots came from one gun. And were being triggered wildly up over men's heads. Rearing from his knees, Dana plunged into the passage, body caroming uncontrollably from the side walls. He felt as if he moved through a dream, half floating with little control of his body. Then arms were steadying him and he was looking into Elvira Hill's face.

She dropped the large Colts she had been working to get him under one shoulder. Somehow they got out of the passage to her pony. Found his. For years after he was to remember her sobbing breath as she struggled to help him clamber into the hull. Then they were riding.

The moon was couched on a hill to the west and the wind had blown cold when they stopped once. Her hand was on his arm, shaking him to rouse him from the coma. But her voice sounded as if a half mile away. Laboriously his mind toiled to the conclusion that she must have followed him when he went on after she

seemed to go back down the draw. Followed him and saved him.

"Dana, Dana. . . .Please, darling. Where can I take you? You've got to get some place before they find us. Where, Dana?"

He said, "To the Widow McTigue's store. . . .Little Bonnet Creek." It sounded like somebody else talking. "Maury. . . .Little Maury. . . . He—he didn't come out with me. I've got to go back and. . . ." He tried to swing his pony. But she caught at the bridle, and she was the stronger-one then. . . .

"AND ten pounds of the dried beans, Mrs. McTigue. . . ." The words were insane. But when Dana unglued his eye lids they seem to hang in the dimness about him. He knew he had heard them. When he pushed up on an elbow, it felt as if wild horses were stampeding inside his skull and trying to kick out the sides. Fumbling upward with a hand he found the bandage like a cap over the top of his head. He clutched and pawed on the pallet beneath him till he located his shell belt and holsters and guns.

"And you'd better let me have five gallons of coal oil, Mrs. McTigue. . . .Think it'll rain today?"

The voices came from below. Dana moved a leg and a plank was rough on his foot and he realized his boots had been removed. A little pencil of sunlight dropped like a taut yellow rope from a chink in the corner of the roof. Then his nostrils caught the aroma of manila hemp and molasses and flour and it all flooded back to him. He was in the Widow McTigue's store where Elvira had brought him.

He recalled arriving there in the hours when the tide of night was leaving its drab dregs on the beach of dawn. Of telling the Widow blind Francie had been right, that he was Dana Rank, still alive. Then of being half dragged by the two women up the stairs to the attic room under the eaves. His mind leapfrogged a jump further back in time and he saw the scene in Jackson's Hole again.

"Maury!" He thought he cried it out but his voice was just a thin whisper. One of his moving hands hit the pitcher of water beside the pallet and he gulped from it greedily. Below the customer said:

"Mrs. McTigue, has that preacher man passed through yet on his way back?"

"Not yet, Jim. And I've got those clothes all cleaned up and mended for him too."

When the front door closed, Dana stood up. He felt weak as if he had been drained of Life's fluid. A big red rag over the back of a chair came into his line of vision. After a moment he realized it was his shirt, blood-drenched. He worked slowly to the door and opened it and stepped out onto the little landing at the head of the stairs. Elvira, sleeping at the top of the stairs in a sitting position with the little derringer he'd given her on her lap, roused. Then they were in each others' arms.

AFTER a while they talked. He asked if there was any word from the bunch. She shook her head. "I've got to ride out and—and find Maury. I—" His big body started to crumple and she had to catch him. There was going to be no riding for him for some time.

Later, she had to leave. She had to get back to forestall any search for her. Such a search might lead to Dana too. Mrs. McTigue brought up a bowl of broth. And Dana dozed again on his pallet, waking in fits and jerks. He was tormented by dreams of what had happened to Maury. And too how his presence here endangered the widow and her blind child.

When he woke in the evening, Elvira was kneeling beside him. They almost had a fight. Insisting he had to get out, to ride and find his bunch, he pushed her off and got halfway down the stairs into the store. Then the little bell hanging over the inside of the door tinkled at the entrance of a customer and he had to drop flat behind the railing of the stairs. Collapse would have been a better word. When the customer left, the girl got him back to his pallet.

"Dana, darling, I don't want you hung! Please, please! They're combing the range for you, Mr. Keene and his men. The story is you could not have gone far. Mr. Keene had raised the price on your head to two thousand dollars. Remember, you're an outlaw."

That reminded him of something, causing him to smile as he cut his gray eyes at her with his old look. "And you liked me before you knew who I really was. . .when you thought I actually was an outlaw, Elly."

She shook her head, smiling back. "I knew—all the time, Dana." The change in his features hadn't fooled her. "The proud way you carry your head. . . .And—well, the way you move, Dana. It—it's sort of flowing, as if you weren't conscious of your body."

"Say, what is this?" he asked sheepishly.

"No. My eye is trained to catch those things. And—and you've got a trick of holding your right shoulder slightly higher when you're tense over something. I knew you the instant you walked into the schoolhouse that day. You see, I was trained to be an artist. You study a person's body. There were some sketches of my pupils in the schoolhouse."

He remembered them. She had to leave, finally. He felt very lonely afterward, napping fitfully. Mrs. McTigue brought him some more food. The night wore on slowly. Then he was galvanized in a sitting position, clutching one of his guns. It took will power to steady his hand enough to get it up. His head felt fiery and he guessed he had a fever. The banging on the front door came again. Dana was at the head of the stairs when the Widow McTigue opened up. He had already decided to give himself up if it was some of Will Keene's gun pack. He couldn't endanger the widow and her child in a shooting ruckus.

It was Andy Beaker, inquiring for him.

THE widow took them back into the kitchen. In the wash of the flickering candle, Beaker was haggard and uneasy, working his lucky silver bullet in one hand, putting it into his shirt pocket, then taking it out again.

"Things're bad, Dana." Things had been bad at the Slash-R. The gunmen-bunkhouse spread was on hand and had guards out. Pop Moss had been killed. Toby was shot in the leg. The bunch had been badly repulsed, and returning across the range they had run smack into Keene with Venzan's bunch returning from the Hole. There had been more gunning. Both bands had been so surprised that it was a standoff in the darkness. But the Broken Band had been dispersed as they high-tailed it away, every man for himself.

Beaker had gone on to the Hole, met a couple of others there. But they had cleared out pronto when they saw the dead men. It was too dangerous to remain with Keene knowing of the hideout.

"Where are you now?" Dana asked, heart sinking.

They were down at John Hawes' half burnt-out ranch, Beaker said. Out there plump on the range was the last place Keene would think of finding them. Hawes himself had drifted in there too. They were hoping the others might show up.

"We're licked, Dana," he concluded sourly. "You were right. It was crazy to hit the Slash-R itself. . . . Now, well, they's nothing to do but pull stakes and get the devil out afore we're planted here."

"Maury?" Dana's mouth hardened when Beaker shook his head.

"Mebbe he's the one—well, mebbe he tipped off Venzan to the hideout. He was the one I told that you were really Rank and—"

Dana had him by the throat, slamming him back against the table. But he was too weak and the Texas gunman twisted free.

"Careful, Rank! I can drill you. . . . Gimme that check you promised me. Not that it'll ever be any good but—"

Out in the back a fallen branch cracked as sharp as a pistol shot. It was too late to extinguish the light. Dana and Beaker retreated into the dark store as somebody rapped at the

kitchen door. Mrs. McTigue opened up. It was a neighbor, a hoeman from up the creek. The widow explained the light by saying Frances was sick.

"Well, I'm right sorry about that," the hoeman said. He was on his way home from Union Hill. "And I thought you'd want to know, Mrs. McTigue, being as how you were always such a good friend of Dana Rank's."

"What, Mr. Clother?"

"They're a-going to bury him in Union tomorrow morning."

"What? Good Lord in Heaven, they can't do that! They—"

"Yep, ma'm. Keene had the body brought in from Coyote Cut. Uh course, there ain't nothing left but the skeleton, the bones picked clean by the buzzards. Keene bought the finest coffin in town. And tomorra morning, they're a-going to bury him. Old Bible Doc Pease is going to git out of a sickbed to lead the burial service. . . .Well, I'll be going along, ma'm."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE eavesdropping Dana understood Will Keene's motive behind the public burial of the skeleton he, Keene, knew was not Dana Rank. It was the answer to those I. O. U.'s signed with Dana Rank's name and left in Claybank. It had been a gesture, instinctive, of honesty on Dana's part. He had taken enough, robbed men enough, in his time. But it had had repercussions, he now realized. Keene's burial trick proved that. Those I. O. U's had sown suspicion, cast doubt on the claim Dana Rank was dead. This was Keene's answer.

Now he would be officially dead with all Union Hill to witness his demise, practically.

Beaker said, "That clinches it, Rank. We're finished."

Mrs. McTigue had closed and barred the back door. "If Doctor Pease knew what he was going to do. . .if he only knew," she keened.

Bible Doc Pease. . . .It rang a bell in Dana's memory, took him back to his boyhood days. To the time he had broken his left arm when he was thrown by that half-broken roan. Bible Doc had come down the trail a short while after it happened that hot afternoon. Bible Doc they had named him because he had been a circuit-riding preacher who practised medicine on the side before he settled down in Union Hill. And Bible Doc had set Dana's busted arm that day.

That was the answer to Keene's newest move. Realization of it stabbed through Dana. He grabbed Beaker's arm as they returned to the kitchen. "Get the men at Hawes' place and bring them into town!"

"What? Are you lo—"

"Bring them in to meet me. I'm going in for the funeral."

"Now, listen, Rank. You—"

"Bring them in!" His feverish voice whipped thinly but savagely. "This is the last pot—the big jackpot—and we're taking it, by grab!"

"Mr. Rank," the widow began worriedly. "You can't ride—"

"I can—to save my own life and—and the Valley! Beaker, get them and bring them in, man! Tell them to hang around the side road up from the hotel."

Beaker pulled out a gun and offered it butt foremost. "Blow out your own brains, Rank. It'll save you a heap of sweating."

Dana said, "You'd like to get that five thousand, wouldn't you?"

Beaker tongued his lips. "Yeah. . . .What's your idea?"

"Don't worry. I—" Something halted him from explaining. "Well, I'm going to attend my own funeral. Bring in the men. That's all. Hurry!" He couldn't get upstairs fast enough for his boots after Beaker had left.

OUT in the night, Beaker pulled his horse down to a walk and did some heavy pondering as he moved toward Hawes' old rancho Andrew Beaker was a business man out to take care of one Andrew Beaker first of all. He weighed the odds. Then he clucked to the cayuse, and as he kicked the animal to a gallop, he veered southward toward Union Hill. Dana Rank didn't have a chance

of winning the pot, Beaker decided. But Andy Beaker saw a way for him to get a piece of it. . . .

WHEN Dana, dressed, came back downstairs, the Widow McTigue was opening a bottle of bonded whisky. "I keep a few bottles in stock for medicine in an emergency," the woman said practically. "This is an emergency—and you'll need a heap of medicine before you're finished in Union Hill."

He dropped an arm across her shoulders. "Don't worry. And—don't let Miss Elvira know anything when she comes back." He told her what he intended to do.

She stared. "Mr. Rank, they'll kill you on sight the minute you ride in. It'll be a double funeral! Oh-h!" She took her grayed head in her hands. "That Will Keene will be on guard. They've seen you and—Oh Almighty Father in Heaven, look down and hear this poor sinner. Protect and save. . . ." Her lips moved as she continued silently.

Dana tightened his gunbelt and looked around embarrassedly. It was then his eyes lighted on the long, black garment hanging from a hook on the side wall. Midway down the lower half—it was a full-length affair—was a neatly darned tear. Dana recalled the conversation in the store about the preacher who had passed through. His eyes widened as he took in the flat-crowned wide curling-brimmed parson's hat hung above the garment. The latter was a minister's cassock.

"They'll know you," the Widow moaned again.

Dana pointed. "Could I—could I wear that?"

She turned to look at the preacher's clothes. Her jaw sagged. Then she walked over and took down the cassock and hat. "You'll be pitting your strength against a son of Satan, Mr. Dana. . . .Take it. The man of the Lord would have it so, I'm sure. . . ."

SOMETHING had gone wrong. Dana couldn't understand what. But as he moved along the side street around the corner from the big hotel, he saw none of the bunch. Not even Beaker himself.

Union was jam-packed. Crowds thronged the wooden sidewalks of the main street, spilling out into the gutters. The whisky mills were doing a land-office business. Up on the side street men tilted bottles to their heads. All business had halted. "Never thought my funeral would serve as the occasion for a blowout," he thought with a twinge of bitterness.

A wildly laughing man barged against Dana, striking the lump of one of the six-guns beneath the black preacher's cassock Dana wore. But the gent was too orey-eyed to notice. "Pahdon me, Father. . . But that dirty dog of a Rank is being buried today and we feel pretty good."

Dana moved along the side road again, peering into the whisky mills. He could hardlly enter them in that garb. But there was no sign of any of the bunch. He wondered if perhaps they'd lacked the nerve.

There was a drone of repressed excitement from the main road. It stilled reverently. When Dana got to the corner, stumbling once in the long-skirted cassock, he saw them bearing the coffin containing his supposed remains from the undertaker's parlor. The three Slash-R gunmen who'd been on guard at the door all morning were shoving folks back. The coffin was lifted into a wagon. A man took the bridle of the horse and began to lead it down the hill. Down the steps of the hotel, Will Keene, wearing a black necktie and sombrero as his mourning, trotted quickly down the hotel steps. Trigger slammers hedged him in. One of them was Black Pete Venzan. The little party swung in behind the bier. The bier holding the bones of Georgia, the gunman-cowhand Will Keene had shot dead at the edge of Coyote Cut back in the lost Hills.

Dana fought down the impulse to run, to cut behind the main road buildings and get up there close to Keene and party. But any such move would as good as unfrock him. He had to act the part, a circuit-riding minister who'd happened into town.

He moved in with the throng stretching behind the wagon hearse like a long weaving tail. It grew quiet enough to hear the creak of the wagon wheels. A canopy of alkali like a white pall rose to overhang the procession.

DOWN BY Schmidt's butcher store the cavalcade turned right off the main street to pass between some tumble-down shanties petering out through the brush. Mopping the sweat that poured down from beneath the black hat, Dana saw a bottle being passed around among the Slash-R group up front. Dana's hands fisted. Then he shuddered as if he felt somebody watching his back. He looked around. A fat man hobbling on a crutch smiled and said it was hot. The scuffed-up dust became choking.

Then the procession moved beneath the giant aged cottonwood, over the hump and Union's Boothill lay just below them. It was a sandy shaly space stretching off the elbow of the hill, surrounded by a straggling broken-down snake-rail fence. A shallow gully, cut by rain, meandered down the center of it, eeling around big Resurrection Rock, and cutting the area of grave humps and lopsided weathered crosses in half. Up the slope some thirty feet from the Rock with "Jesus Saves" whitewashed on it in bleak letters was a fresh heap of sand with a fresh-opened grave beside it.

Dana Rank didn't know how he was going to play it now that the bunch hadn't showed up. But instinct told him that once the coffin bearing Georgia's remains was in that hole and covered—his last chance would be gone.

Most of the procession was halted some yards inside the cemetery gate. Slash-R men had spread out to keep them back. This was going to be a really impressive ceremony. Keene and his group continued on behind the wagon whose wheels ground and rattled on the shaly earth. It creaked to a halt. Men stepped forward and lifted off the coffin and bore it up toward the waiting grave. Some of the big potatoes of the town moved forward too, out from the common herd.

"Let me pass, please, Brother," Dana muttered as he pushed ahead. He bent his black-hatted head as if in reverence as he came to the line of Slash-R men holding the folks back.

"Go ahead, Reverend," one of them said. Dana did. From behind came the grind of boots. One of them was coming on up after him.

By the head of the grave, white-haired old Bible Doc Pease stepped forward, a prayer service book in his hand. He swayed slightly in the heat. Then, as Dana stepped to the edge of the men ringing the grave, Bible Doc began.

"Oh, Almighty Father above, Thou Who savest the repentant sinner, we consign to Thee in your great wisdom and mercy. . . . " He coughed, then went on in a thin mumble, the prayer-book trembling in his blue-veined hand. The coffin had been put into the shallow hole. Carelessly, too. It lay almost catty-cornered, one end caught up on the earth at the side.

There were two men behind him, Dana realized suddenly. He risked a look over his shoulder, never quite completed it. Over on the left, standing beyond a corner of the grave, Black Pete Venzan, hair oil-slicked down for once, met his eyes and smirked. It settled inside Dana like a heavy rock sinking to the bottom of a black pool. He had been spotted. They knew him, and he was covered!

Bible Doc was nearing the end of his service. "'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,'" he intoned. Stooping, he picked up some sand and let it filter from his fingers onto Georgia's coffin. "'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. . . '"

WILL KEENE half yawned and shook the hat he held at his side impatiently. Two men with shovels stopped leaning on them. Dana knew he had to speak now or never. A gun muzzle bit into his back in mute command. Down near Resurrection Rock a man nodded. It

was Andy Beaker. In that instant, Dana knew Beaker had sold out to the higher bidder. Beaker had tipped off Keene.

The first shovel load of dirt rattled off the coffin lid. A woman back in the crowd squealed, pointing, as a big pack rat darted through the ticket of boots about the grave and jumped down beside the coffin. The confusion was like an explosion. Keene barked orders; men pushed and milled. One of the grave-diggers jumped down to rout the rat. The animal darted around the other end of the coffin, black eyes like glassy beads, peered out.

"Aw, bury 'em both! Let 'em bury 'em both, Keene," said Pete Venzan, bending to look down.

Will Keene did not answer. He stood as stiffly as a man lashed to a stake, eyes bulging, arms held hard against his sides as if his life depended on it. His life did. Dana saw it first. A portion of a yellow head showed behind Keene. It was little Maury with a hogleg in Keene's back.

He had been brought into town and held as a secret prisoner at the hotel by Keene. A hostage in case of some unforeseen last-minute upset. The button had escaped and come to the cemetery. Dana grasped at the break Fate had given him.

"Drill me and your boss gets the same dose," he said quietly over his shoulder to the gunmen at his shoulder to the gunmen at his back. "See?" He got his answer. The gun in his back withdrew slightly in astonishment. Then Dana barked:

"Bible Doc! Bible Doc!" He speared a finger at the aged Pease as the latter peered around. "Doc, do you remember setting a broken arm for Dana Rank when he was a boy?"

THE OLD preacher-doc straightened, peering. "Why, sure, sure."

"That's just a skeleton—they say—in that coffin," Dana went on hoarsely. "Just bones. Dana Rank's bones, they say. So if you looked at them you should be able to see the lump on the bone of the left arm where the fracture healed, shouldn't you?"

"Why, sure, sure," piped Bible Doc in the tense hush. "But I didn't see the skeleton in the—the—" He pointed down into the grave.

"Then I demand the coffin be opened to identify the dead man!" shouted Dana. He almost choked as he saw Beaker, unnoticed by anybody else, slipping in from the flank, slipping in toward Maury behind Keene. "Because if the skeleton has no lump on the left arm—it can't be Rank! And it isn't Dana Rank, I'll tell you now!"

Then he jumped for his life, jumped down into the grave, the last move expected of him by the gun slick at his back. "Because I am Dana Rank!" Dana bawled. And the first spatter of shots crashed out like living exclamation points for his words.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE INITIAL gun report was Beaker's as he threw down on Maury behind Keene. Maury sank and then guns clattered wildly in a discordant cacophony of death. The black cassock, ripped open, flowed back from Dana Rank's body. His Colts were out from the holsters beneath and spiking lead. Two of Keene's trigger slammers collapsed in their tracks, one of them sliding headfirst over an edge of the grave. A third one went wading backward holding his belly. Black Pete Venzan dived backward. But the bullet hole in his sombrero was too high to hurt him.

Dana ducked and flattened beside one side of the coffin supposed to be his. There were two holes in the top of it now. Two other slugs had chunked into the earthen wall of the grave. And Mrs McTigue would have a hole to patch in the bottom of the minister's cassock. With a nasty little almost human screech, another slug ripped off the head of a nail in the coffin top. Unjacking his body, Dana triggered twice over the upper end of the grave hole to drive back the pair creeping in up there.

He paid. A piece of lead scorched

beneath his left arm, drew a fiery finger across his ribs. He buckled and was twisted half around. The gravedigger, grovelling at the other end of the hole as if he would tunnel through to China, bleated as the gunfire broke off a moment. But it was merely a matter of time, Dana knew. Keene had to get him, to silence him, or he was licked in the town. Psychologically Keene was backed against a wall himself. So Dana knew the moment would come when he would hurl in his men despite any kind of fire from the hole.

Screams and the wild beat of feet came from the gate as people stampeded to get to safety. The gravedigger kept alternately bleating and pleading. Dana spat drily into the fresh earth. Damned if he'd die like a cornered rat in a hole. They had him, they had him all right. It was too still and he knew why. Keene was no fool. He'd have them bellying in from all sides, safe from gunshot unless he straightened for a shot and thus exposed himself. They'd creep in and then be filling that grave with lead to make it a double grave.

"Like hell they will! They'll have to throw me into it afterward, by grab!" Dana muttered. He thumbed fresh shells into the hot guns, eased up along the end wall, then suddenly flung himself over the rim. And simultaneously came the smash of driving horse hoofs. From his knees, Dana fired point-blank into the face of an increeping man. The face was there—then it wasn't. Another hombre flung lead past Dana's shoulder. Dana put out his light too.

A SCREECH pierced the gunfire. A man rose up some fifteen distant, running like mad. But not at Dana—to the left, instead. He was running from something sweeping in from the side of the cemetery. Then Dana saw them. It was the bunch, some of them at least. John Hawes was in the front, standing in the stirrups as he hammered both guns at the gun pack. Just behind was bald Samson Toby, howling like mad as he raced in. There were others, crashing through a hole in the cemetery fence.

It was like a mirage. Dana couldn't figure how they seemed to come out of the earth like that. There was no time to ponder it then. Against Keene's gun slicks and the Venzan outfit, they were only a handful. The unexpectedness of the attack had turned the tide momentarily. If the gun pack ever got a chance to rally—

Dana flung forward. A bullet geysered sand from the heap. He plunged through it, both his weapons spitting. A fleeing man leaped, then rolled in a knot like a plugged jackrabbit. Another went drunkenly in a half circle, carried by his momentum, when Dana got him in a leg. Hawes drew abreast on his left, then was rolling on the ground as a bullet stopped his pony dead. Keene's men were recovering from panic, dropping behind grave mounds and stray clumps of sage, and returning the fire. After all, they were wire-tough gun slicks.

Dana went to his knees to steady and hammer lead at a pair in a patch of weeds. One of them almost got him before the second turned and fled, leaving a flattened partner behind. One of Dana's guns clicked empty and he paused to ram home fresh cartridges. He drew bead on another darting Keene man; it looked like slick-headed Venzan. Then the man was gone, blotted out by a wall of dust lifted by a gust of oven-hot wind. It exiled Dana, leaving him cut off as if he were alone on a flat, only sound, screaming and cursing and gun slaps, boiling around him.

He kept advancing though. The Keene men must be kept on the run. You won the jackpot or got your chips cashed this time. The blinding wall broke and he collided with a gunman who was firing just past Dana's head at a horseman. He sank under a blow of Dana's gun barrel.

It was all a little crazy, like some senseless pattern on a quilt. The gusty wind kept blotting out the scene, isolating men as it whipped up sheets of the loose surface earth. An unseen man groaned in death agony a few feet from Dana, then was no-

where to be seen when the dust passed. And always the red-yellow fangs of gunfire bit through the picture.

WHEN ANOTHER partition of dust parted, Dana discovered he was moving down toward Resurrection Rock. He corrected direction. Then the hobbling Toby came reeling back, spitting curses with blood washing down the side of his face. Another of the bunch—it looked like Dockins—came wobbling with a crimson blossom spreading over his shirt front. It was plain; the Keene pack had made a stand somewhere.

Dana remembered the little wash that split the graveyard. He was running upgrade to his left. Somebody had him in his gunsights; lead slithered close by. Dust enveloped him again. He was almost knocked down and there was a numb frozen feeling in his right arm. Automatically he somehow hooked the right colts into his waistband. He was hit in that arm and it was no more good. Then he landed in the wash on his knees. Twisting he headed down its wandering course.

He was right. Keene's men had backed into it and were making their stand in its cover. He rounded a bend and cut loose on two of them. After that it was very like some fantastic distorted dream. He kept wading ahead, taking a gun toll. And then they were routed as they sensed they were out-flanked. Men poured out of the ditch and ran blindly, pell mell, scattering and taking boot in hand for their lives. A rider from the bunch leaped the ditch just ahead of the roaring Dana. Flying dirt blinded him again. When he got his eyes open, stumbling ahead, Black Pete Venzan straightened from the wash like an apparition.

Dana had just dropped his empty gun, had hauled the second one from his belt. He kept riding the trigger at the muzzle froth of Venzan's weapon. Venzan's weapon fell. The outlaw stood with a sleepy look. Then a red spurt of liquid parted his loose black hair. The top of his brains had been blown out.

Dana saw his men chasing the scattered gun pack down toward the lower corner of the cemetery. Some of the latter were shedding their hardware, flinging up their arms. For men from the crowd of townspeople had drawn chips, were pushing the Keene men into a corner, now that they saw the power of the Slash-R range pirates really challenged.

Dana almost ran into the upper end of Resurrection Rock. Panting, he leaned against it. Down along its left side, a clump. of brush jerked.

"Come out, you damn—" Dana started. It was Will Keene himself, appearing after he tossed out a smoking Colts. Surrendering.

Fury almost blinded Dana. He couldn't kill an unarmed man. He saw something stir by a corner of the rock behind Keene. Triggered. And nothing happened; Dana's gun was empty. A knife jumped into Keene's hand and he leaped in. His one chance was to silence Dana. Then he might be able to lie, to talk his way out. A twister of dust enveloped them.

DANA HEARD his name shouted as he finally backed out of it. The twister passed on. A few feet away, Will Keene lay writhing, one arm broken, a knife wound in his side. The way he was screaming foretold the fact he would live to pay for what he had done.

"Dana!" It was little Maury stumbling up, Maury who had only been creased by Venzan's shot at the start of the ruckus. "Dana—" His eyes widened at a figure beyond the swaying Dana's shoulder. It was Andy Beaker; the traitor, who had stepped out from the corner of the rock.

Maury and Beaker fired almost in the same instant. Beaker's bullet passed between Dana and Maury. Maury's slug just seemed to have ripped open the side of Beaker's shirt beneath the pocket. Beaker was standing there in the gunman's crouch, body s l a u n c h e d around. There was a t h i r d explosion. His eyes popped as if he'd been hit

an invisible blow. Blood welled from his chest as he collapsed, dead. Maury's shot had exploded the lucky silver bullet in Beaker's shirt pocket, the only bullet the superstitious Beaker believed could kill him. It had. . . . .

John Hawes came up the hill, actually grinning. "Looks as if we licked 'em for keeps, Dana. . . . Though I'm afraid some of 'em got away."

Dana wanted to laugh as he sagged against Resurrection Rock. "H-how—how did you get here, John? Who brought—"

"That schoolmarm, Dana! She came riding down from the Widow McTigue's store and told us. . . . We left her back at the hotel and—"

They hadn't. Elvira Hill was running up a path toward Dana. She stumbled, but he caught her and held her hard before she fell. . . .

IT WAS a tense baffled bunch, including some of the leading citizens of Union Hill, around Dana in the lobby of the hotel. The coffin bearing Georgia's remains had been reopened. Bible Doc had testified it could not be Dana Rank's remains because the left arm had not been broken. These men now knew this was Dana Rank standing before them. And they were baffled, unsure what the next move might be, wondering. Hawes was grim-mouthed, Samson Toby in the chair held mute accusation in his eyes. They were wondering if Dana had tricked them, if perhaps he had led the Broken Bunch only to regain his old power. Out in front, a throng waited nervously.

Dana pulled the limp quirly from his mouth, smiled tiredly as he shifted his bandaged arm in a sling. Then he drew out a paper from his jeans pocket, a paper he had carefully written out some time back. He extended it to John Hawes.

"Take it out on the porch and read it to the folks, John. I'm going to try to make amends. . . Read it—and tell me afterward if you can forgive me. . . " Dana turned and walked slowly toward a door in the back near where Elvira Hill stood. . . .

THE TWILIGHT was moist and warm and redolent with the odor of sage as Dana moved in the purple shadows up the side street from the hotel with Elvira Hill at his side. Back on the main road, a succession of cheers, enthusiastic and good-natured, rose again and again on the night. John Hawes was reading Dana's statement from the hotel porch, the signed sworn document in which Dana promised to right the wrongs in the Valley. How the Slash-R land was going to be withdrawn to its old boundaries. How John Hawes and Maury Lewes' father—and the others who had been forced out in the old cut-throat swashbuckling lawless days of Slash-R reign were to be given back their outfits. And, finally how, Dana Rank promised to compensate every man-jack of them for any damages they had sustained.

A new day had dawned in Gunshot Valley. Dana heard his name shouted from down on the main street. And as he gazed down at Elvira Hill by his side, he felt a new day, a new life had dawned for him. He tossed away his quirly.

"Well, Dana," she said softly. "You're the big man in the valley again. You've got your Slash-R back—and all your power."

He forgot about the throb of his wounded right arm. "Power. . . " he said it musingly. "Maybe. Somehow, it isn't important any more. Power—yes, to right as fully as I can the wrongs I have done. . . But I spilled blood. Dinero can never pay back for that."

They moved on slowly. Elvira spoke again. "Yes, Dana. But you risked your own blood and life to break the power of your own outfit and give the little independent ranchers a chance again. Under Will Keene, they were doomed. You've paid back, Dana. Paid in full, I think."

He moved to the other side of her so his left arm was available. "What you think, Elly, is the important thing." The left arm went around her waist. They walked on into the glow of the moon peeping over the line of trees to the north. .

A Powerful Novelet of Midnight Murder

The strange voice over my phone had said the back door would be unlocked. I skirted the house, and found that the strange voice had known what it was talking about. I closed the door behind me, stood a moment in the kitchen. Like a great cavern composed of many smaller, dark caves the house seemed to close in about me. The quiet, the dreary feel of it brought pinpoints of sweat.

Then I moved forward and saw the man lying on the floor, on the other side of the kitchen table. There was no doubt of his corpulent, well-dressed, gory bulk being dead. What evidently had once been his heavy, hanging face, judging from the rest of his build, had been blown away by a vicious shotgun blast. Something had happened to his hands — they'd been removed at the wrists.

NOBODY KNEW THE CORPSE

By Talmage Powell

plus

CLOTHES MAKE THE MURDER
A Linc Castle Mystery
By Seymour Irving Richin

WINGS FOR THE KID
A Danny Novelet
By Grant Lane

GIVE THE BLONDE A BIER
By Rex Whitechurch

In The March
Crack DETECTIVE Stories

A runty oldster, pursued by two mean-looking hombres, burst into the room.

PEACE WANTED

At Gabriel's Trump

By CHARLES D. RICHARDSON, JR.

Saddlesoap Keech and Bill Ratchet were plumb sick of guns and fighting — and this town of Gabriel's Trump seemed just about the quietest thing this side of Heaven. Only . . .

THE SIGN tacked on the thick oak trunk at the end of the street said: THIS IS GABRIEL'S TRUMP. POPULATION—500. VISITORS WELCOME. THIS MEANS YOU, BROTHER.

Saddlesoap Keech, the tall gent with the sail-like ears and jutting cheekbones, scratched the wart on his long nose, spat. He shifted in his saddle, then looked over at his runtish companion on the sorrel mare.

"Looks like we hit it, Bill," he said. "B'gosh, it looks like we did. Gabriel's Trump—a berg with a label like that ought to be plenty peaceful."

Bill Ratchet bobbed the fiery mop that was his head. He was staring past the blacksmith shop at a drowsing Mexican beneath a small maple. The Mex's sombrero drooped chestward, and the persistent blue bottle fly buzzing around the man's nose didn't stir up any notice.

Bill's squint eyes roved to a bony coach dog in the middle of the dusty street. The hound was snoring lustily.

Bill stifled a cavernous yawn. "Peaceful is right," he agreed. "Skowwhillikers! A gent could hear the grass grow in this place."

But it was what they'd wanted. For a whole year now, night and day, Bill and Saddlesoap had ridden sporadically, ever hunting a town that was really peaceful. A town where you didn't have to worry about doing

something that made some bird sore at you, and you'd have to draw to defend yourself. A town where guns and gunning were outlawed.

It wasn't Saddlesoap's fault that he had killed five men. Those hombres were bad men, looking for an excuse to kill. They'd just found a different proposition in Saddlesoap Keech. He looked harmless, until you prodded him; then it was just too bad. His guns were chain-lightning, as were Bill Ratchet's. Bill was little and insignificant looking, but it didn't do to ride him hard, either.

So one thing led to another and Bill and Saddlesoap found themselves gunmen, in a sense. They got the rep of speed drawers, and became unwanted. They'd wanted to stay home, live in peace, but weren't allowed to. Someone would pick a quarrel, draw, lose. The two pards were so fast with guns that it looked as if the others didn't pull at all.

That's what they were trying to get away from—any more gunning. They were so sick of guns and powder-smoke, they didn't want to see or hear them. Three states they'd plodded through, seeking vainly a town without gunbrawls. It seemed everywhere gents just wouldn't let you exist quietly.

It was paradise for them to come upon a place like Gabriel's Tump.

SADDLESOAP and Bill rode down the dust to the small hotel. They left their broncs at the hitch-rack, went into the neat lobby with its upholstered chairs and big davenport.

"Like a room for me and my pard here," Saddlesoap told the pale-faced clerk behind the desk. "One with a southern exposure and plenty of quiet."

The clerk shoved over the smudged register. "We pride ourselves on our law and order. I'm sure you'll find everything to your satisfaction. Front!"

A young kid with bare feet padded up, slung their warbags across his shoulder. Bill and Saddlesoap followed him up the creaking stairs.

It was a neat little room, the one the kid opened up. Big window, plenty of cool air drifting in. Large, comfortable-looking double bed, not fancy, but clean. There was a dresser with clean towels and a water basin in the rear. Overhead, the ceiling, though cracked and loose-hanging in the center, was spotlessly clean.

Saddlesoap pitched the kid two bits, removed his hat and neckerchief. "Bill," he sighed, "I think we've got it at last. A peaceful joint."

Bill was stretched out on the double bed. "I'm campin' right here for the next twelve hours."

Saddlesoap followed suit. He undressed to his underwear, flopped on the white linen beside Ratchet. He unkinked his gaunt six-foot-three gratefully, let out a gusty, satisfied breath.

"Peace," he whispered. "Heaven-sent, beautiful peace."

It was shortly after midnight, with a bright moon glaring in the window, that the two of them were rudely wakened by a cougar-like scream. The door burst inward on groaning hinges, and three men plunged in.

The screaming gent was a little man, scarcely five feet at best. His pursuers were giants, each taller than Saddlesoap. One of them was noticeably stooped, and had a hairlip. The other had a pot belly and mean, slit eyes.

Roaring and shooting off six-guns, they bore down on the little man.

The entire trio tramped up over Bill and Saddlesoap's bed, punching Bill's stomach and grinding their heels in Saddlesoap's legs.

The next moment they were out the open window, racing over the shingled porch roof directly below.

Saddlesoap sat up, rubbing his ankles. "Must be something they et," he opined.

Bill Ratchet nodded, doubling up. "Shore," he groaned. "Maybe nightmares, huh?"

Saddlesoap turned over. "Well, let's get on back to sleep. We can see about it in the morning."

AT SUNUP next day, the pair were in the lobby. They had to wait around for the clerk. He finally

came in from the back stairway, yawning like a canyon.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he greeted. "I trust you had a pleasant night's rest."

"It wasn't exactly pleasant," said Saddlesoap, "unless you call havin' three gents walkin' on your hide comfortable. Listen, just who in hell were those gazabos?" He proceeded to enlarge on the strange occurrence.

The palish man gave a start. "Shooting? Big men—I, er, you must be mistaken. We have no one of that description around here. You must have been, ah, dreaming."

Bill Ratchet snorted. "Dreaming—hell! My belly yelps yet from the way that big hombre punched it. Fella," he reached over the desk, grabbed the clerk's shirt up into a ball, "you gonna tell us who them skunks were, or ain't yuh?"

"I—I tell you, I don't know," the clerk howled, squirming. His eyes began to bulge.

Saddlesoap gave his partner a clip on the head. "Let 'im be, Bill. We'll find out somewheres else."

He dragged the fuming Ratchet from the room.

They went over to the sheriff's office. Sheriff Pete Kramer was very fat, with slightly graying hair, and had an array of gold teeth in his mouth that would have gladdened the heart of any prospector. When he got out of his chair, it was like a bear leaving hibernation.

"Howdy, gents. What kin I do for you in this fair city of Gabriel's Trump?"

Saddlesoap and Bill began to tell him at once. They talked so fast, and in a muddle, that the lawman got red in the face trying to figure it out. "Hold it! Hold it!" Kramer bawled. "Now, what you're tryin' to say is that a couple of gents bust in your room shootin', ain't it? They was both big, and one had a hairlip, right?"

Bill Ratchet nodded. "They wellnigh stomped out our guts," he growled. "We come to this berg lookin' for peace."

"And we're gonna have it," Saddlesoap Keech added grimly, "if we has to clean up the damn town to get it."

Sheriff Kramer squinted at the two of them. "Peace, eh?" he said. "You shore come to a swell place. Oh, I admit we had it quiet enough a few months ago. But that was before the Hartwell brothers barged in. Gents, them two buzzards rippin' into your room last night was Jay and Chink Hartwell. Jay, with the hairlip. Chink, the slant-eyed duck. As bad a coupla hombres as you'd find in hell. They was probably after some bird unlucky enough to cross 'em."

He removed the smelly rope of a cigar from his thick lips.

"Listen," he continued, "and mebbe you'll wish you'd never pulled bit into this dump. Jay and Chink Hartwell are killers, gun-slingin' toughs of the worst brand. They've been mixed up in holdups, cattle rustlings, downright murderings that'd make your hair curl. Ain't a prison made to hold 'em, and nobody seems to have guts enough to run 'em down. They picked on this town because it looked like a setup, I reckon. Got their lamps centered on the Cattleman's Bank, less I miss my guess.

"Me, I been run ragged. Them polecats bumped off my three deputies, made it look like it was self-defense. Everyone else is scared plumb green to buck 'em. Hell, I'd gun 'em myself, if I could catch them at something. So far, they've been too damn slick. Can't pin nothin' on 'em nohow."

SADDLESOAP Keech's gray eyes locked with Bill Ratchet's, then the tall man turned to the sheriff.

"Kramer," he said quietly, "you are going to swear in me and my pard here as deputies. To put a stop to the Hartwell outrages."

The lawman choked. "What! Man alive, do you know how them gents kin shoot? Say, maybe you're gunnies yourselves, hell-fire with sixes? I don't care what yuh are, if only you can slap the ears off—"

Saddlesoap's eyes remained steady. "We can shoot," he said, "But not no more. We're through with guns. Get it? Through. We'll hogtie the Hartwells, but without the use of

firearms. Got to have peace around here, eh, Bill?"

"Right!" echoed the dumpy Ratchet. "Ain't gonna add no more saddle-blisters to our pants."

They were sworn in, badges pinned to their vests. Without another word, they stalked from the stuffy office back toward the hotel. The fat sheriff watched them go. He directed a red stream of tobacco juice into the dust.

"Without guns," he mused, fingering his cartridge belt. "Loco, that's what they are. Plumb, starin' loco!"

Tuesday afternoon was hot. The town of Gabriel's Trump literally perspired. Heat waves bounced from the dust, and off of the gleaming tin roofs. Gents snored in available shade. Even the horses at the hitchracks drowsed.

It was the hour following the arrival of the gold shipment to the Cattleman's Bank.

Sheriff Kramer stalked down street to the building. He was cursing. Those fool deputies of his, Keech and Ratchet, couldn't be found. They had said they'd keep an eye on the Hartwells, but the lawman didn't take much stock in that. Gunless, they'd be of little help. Kramer intended to stick around the bank and see that nothing happened.

He didn't reckon the bad men would be bold enough to try a holdup in broad daylight, but it wouldn't hurt to be prepared.

IN THE Redeye Saloon, the Hartwell boys were slogging down beers. Chink Hartwell, the slant-eyed hombre, wiped the foam from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"We better get goin'," he said in a low voice. "We don't want Kramer or the rest horning in—"

"Quiet, dammit!" Jay Hartwell's hairlip writhed back across his teeth like a snake. "You want to spoil everything? Come on."

They sauntered out into the street. They walked casually to the end of town and from there into a thick pine forest. Here were their horses, and the outlaw pair quickly mounted, rode at a gallop among the trees. When they finally emerged onto the plain, they were several miles from town and wearing different clothing, hats pulled down over their rough faces.

Then they rode back to Gabriel's Trump from the west. It wouldn't look as if the holdup was pulled by local talent, that way.

The hot street was deserted when they dismounted. "Too good to be true," whispered Chink Hartwell, shifting his guns. "They'll never be lookin' for a stickup at this time of day."

"Cut the gab and put on that mask," rejoined Jay.

Faces completely covered, the pair slid within the bank's entrance.

Only two other men were in sight besides the drowsing cashier—a snoring drunk sprawled in the morris chair by the window, and a ragged oldster swamping the floor with a dirty mop.

A slow smile curled Jay Hartwell's lip beneath his mask.

"Keep an eye on them punks," he ordered his brother. "I'll tend to this cashier gent."

He had just jabbed his six-shooter muzzle through the bars, prodding the cashier into a grunt of fear, when a fat man barged out from behind the potted azalea, twin guns leveled. Sheriff Pete Kramer, with grim determination etched in the folds of his huge jowls.

"Drop 'em and reach!" Kramer hoarsed, "Or by gravy, I'll let you have both loads!"

Jay Hartwell's gun leaped as the outlaw dove to one side. It spat, sharply. Sheriff Kramer's trigger fingers tried to close, became paralyzed from the pain of the bullet in his arm and shoulder. The lawman sank, groaning. Chink Hartwell rapidly disarmed him.

He then rapped Kramer over the head with the butt of his gun.

"He won't give us no more trouble," he grinned. "Quick! Get that dinero and let's fog the hell out of here."

Chink kept his gun leveled on the drunk and the aged janitor. "Just

stay put and be quiet," he told them, "and you'll be all right."

The janitor evidently was hard of hearing. "Eh?" he said shrilly.

Jay Hartwell was scowling over his gun muzzle at the cashier. "Get that dough across the counter pronto or I'll—"

THE DRUNK in the chair was showing signs of life. Erupting a loud belch, he staggered suddenly to his feet, bottle crashing to the floor. He stared bleary-eyed through his scraggly long hair at the two bandits in the center of the room.

"Whash goin' on here?" he said thickly. "Shay, what in hellsh goin' on?"

He weaved jerkily toward Jay Hartwell.

The outlaw frowned. "Get back there, stew, before you get hurt. This is a holdup, see, and this thing in my hand ain't no baby's rattle. Back up—"

The drunk kept coming. "Lishen—You birdsh—can't do this. In the 'mortal words of Abraham Lincoln, 'give me liberty, er give me death.'" He released a series of staccato hiccoughs. "Shtand ready to repel boarders, men! Don't shoot till yuh shpot th' whites of their eyes."

Chink Hartwell was guffawing, Jay even grinning. The hairlipped gunny lowered his weapon slightly. It was enough for the drunk. Suddenly springing into galvanized activity, he leaped forward at Jay, kicked the big man full in the shin. It was a hardy kick, one that brought the outlaw over into a howling crouch. Jay grabbed at his leg, cursing.

At the same moment. the aged janitor scuttled over, wrapped his wet mop about Chink Hartwell's face. Hartwell pitched backward as if he had been struck with a tree trunk.

He measured his length on the wooden floor, dirty water slushing down over his chin.

The janitor and the drunk picked up the fallen weapons.

"Reckon they won't be needin' 'em for a spell," the drunk opined.

Sheriff Kramer was sitting up, rubbing his bruised head. The wounds in his arm and shoulder still hurt, but he couldn't take his eyes away from the pair who had so miraculously outsmarted two of the county's worst gunmen. Kramer's voice finally rattled out.

"Keech and Ratchet!"

It was true. The old janitor dusting off the white flour that had been his white hair, had straightened, become Bill Ratchet. And the drunk parted his disheveled hair, blinked his eyes, and was Saddlesoap Keech. Saddlesoap shook himself like a giraffe, handed the outlaws' guns over to the lawman. He gave the groaning Hartwells a poke with the toe of his boot.

"Knowed you didn't need weapons on a coupla skunks like them two," he grunted. "Better chuck 'em in jail while it's easy."

Sheriff Kramer still was shaking his head as his deputies bandaged his wounds and helped him put the bandits into their cell. "Without guns," the lawman muttered, "yet they tied them hombres into a knot. It don't make sense. Don't make sense at all."

BACK in their hotel room, Saddlesoap Keech and Bill Ratchet prepared for a nap. They were tired and didn't bother to remove anything but their shoes.

They flopped on the bed amid protesting springs.

"Peace, Bill," Saddlesoap breathed contentedly.

Little Bill Ratchet nodded, wriggled his stockinged feet at the bedpost. "Peace," he said. "And not a damn thing to disturb it."

They had just begun to snore a lusty duet, when the huge chunk of plaster, sagging in the center of the ceiling for the past several years, finally gave up its desperate attempt to stay in place, and fell in a shower of dust directly upon the two sleeping men.

(THE END)

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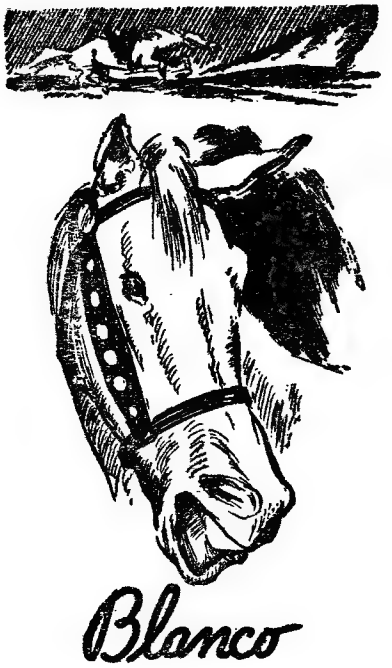

A MESSAGE FOR LOST MULE

By CHESTER B. CONANT

Frightened by gunsmoke and the smell of death, Blanco knew he must still carry his wounded rider safely back to Lost Mule — to deliver a message!

THE SUN, FAST sinking into the deep purple ridges of the Osabe Mountains, was a blood-red disk, tinting Blanco's snow-white coat. He stood there, his white head thrust through the corral fence, nibbling at the few green shoots of young grass on the other side. A slight shiver passed through him as the coolness of dusk increased.

Suddenly his long ears pricked up. The distant drumming of hoofs came to him through the still air. They were approaching at a steady pace. Soon the hoofbeats grew much louder and the scent of the on-coming horse reached his sensitive nostrils. Then a big, sweating bay came around the bend in the road.

The bay was ridden by a fat, bald-headed little man in a dark, flapping coat. He rode straight to the sheriff's house, dropped the reins over the horse's head, and climbed the porch steps. He knocked on the door, pushing back his black Stetson and mopping his broad brow.

From inside the house came the sound of a chair being pushed back, followed by the sharp clink of a spur on the floorboards. Then the sure, steady steps of a pair of high-heeled boots approached, the door swung in.

"Oh—hello, Mr. Crouch." The bronzed sheriff looked down at the perspiring little man with a somewhat quizzical expression. "Come on in," he invited.

"No, I haven't much time, Montgomery," the little man said curtly. "Gotta get right back to town—and what I got to say, I can say right here."

"Suit yourself," said the sheriff. He came out and leaned against the door jamb, pulling a sack of tobacco out of his shirt pocket. He began to build a quirly. "What's on your mind, Mr. Crouch?" he asked, smoothing a brown cigarette paper.

"Montgomery," Crouch's tone suddenly became apologetic, "I hate like hell to have to come out here and tell you this, but things have gone too far. I mean these damn raids that've been pulled off in the last two months. The bank robbery, the burning of old Nelson's shack, and the murder of poor Jesse Barnes' nephew, to name a few." He cleared his throat, noisily.

"Now I know you're just as anxious

Blanco smelled death as the ambusher rode away.

to catch that gang of murderers as the rest of us—but. . . What've you done about it? We had a little meeting in town this morning, Montgomery. We got businesses, you know; we stand to lose a lot if this thing keeps up! My feed store may be next on their list. You've got to get a move on before the whole town's ruined!

Montgomery watched the little man mop his brow as he licked the paper. "I *am* doin' something, Mr. Crouch," he said, quietly. "I'm workin' on it. As soon as I get any results I'll let you know. Just because a man don't go around shootin' his mouth off and makin' himself look busy, don't mean he's sleepin'." He stuck the quirly in his mouth and struck a match on his boot sole.

BLANCO, moving down the corral fence toward another patch of grass, pricked up his ears for the second time as he heard again the sound of approaching hoofs. The hoofbeats grew louder more quickly than before. The horse was coming down the road at a fast clip. He recognized the scent immediately. It was Jed Peters' roan mare.

In a few minutes, Jed came off the road and rode up to the corral. His young face was lined with perspiration and the dark growth of stubble on his chin belied his youth, giving him a grim appearance. He glanced toward the porch as he dismounted and nodded at the two men.

Blanco trotted over as Jed was tethering the roan to the corral fence. He liked this young man who always had a kind word for him and often a

lump of sugar. He thrust his head over the rail and nudged the youth.

"Hello, Blanco," Jed said, softly. "How's my Silver Beauty today?" He patted Blanco's nose gently and stroked his smooth neck with a quick glance over his shoulder at the porch. Abruptly, he turned and walked toward the men.

Blanco turned toward the roan. The lean, strawberry-colored mare extended her neck. He felt her velvety muzzle on his neck as he nuzzled her mane.

The voices from the porch grew louder.

"That's all right," Crouch was saying, "I was just leaving." He went down the steps to his horse and with a slight groan, bent down to pick up the reins. Then, with an awkward motion, he climbed into the saddle, straightened his hat-brim, and rode off.

"Well, what'd you find out?" asked Montgomery as they watched the fat little man ride away.

"Plenty, Mally," answered the youth. His light blue eyes sparkled with pride. "I got that Crane feller good 'n drunk and he talked a blue streak. Naturally, he didn't know me —took me for a nosey tenderfoot from back East. He didn't know that I was born in Lost Mule—which nobody else does, except you, since my folks took me East when I was five years old. And if he knew he was talkin' to the best friend Jesse Barnes' nephew had, he woulda probably blew his head off," he finished with a grim laugh.

"Now here's what I found out." Jed's voice grew stern. "The owlhoot gang is the same one that was run by Bull Bodey when he tried to frame you for the hangnoose. Somebody else is running the show now. Who that is is one of the two things I couldn't find out. They work out of some saloon in Caton City. Crane was doin' the spyin' for 'em in town. But Crane got kinda horny after the last raid, thinks they didn't give him his full cut. He says his job's been taken over by the boss, himself. Every time I mentioned the boss he shut like a sprung bear-trap. The other thing I couldn't find out is which saloon. That, I reckon, we could find out tonight." As he finished, he pulled off his brown Stetson, wiped his face, and then fanned himself with the hat.

Montgomery dropped his cigarette butt and crushed it out with his heel. He reached a hand to the lock of red hair that lay on his forehead and brushed it back. "You go home and get some supper, Jed, and rest some if you can. Meet me back here in a couple of hours. We're ridin' to Caton City tonight!"

"Right, Malley." Jed was exultant, his blue eyes shone. Montgomery watched, musing, as the youth strode toward the corral.

As Jed approached, Blanco reached out his head. Jed patted the silky coat, then reached out to untie the roan.

The roan emitted a shrill scream and crashed heavily on her side, as a gun barked. Jed sprang back and crouched down behind the prostrate horse, his gun in his hand.

Blanco sprang away from the fence at the first sound of the shot. There was a strong memory of pain connected with that terrible crashing noise. The roan's horrifying scream tore at his heart. A tremor of fear shot through him as he ran toward the other end of the corral. Trembling, he waited there, watching the crouched figure of the boy beside the fallen horse. Almost immediately, he knew that the roan was dead, as the death-smell reached his nostrils.

Montgomery's hands were filled the instant he heard the shot. Blanco saw him peer through the porch railing, his head tilted toward the barn.

Something dark flapped for an instant behind the corner of the barn, and Blanco saw Jed's arm come up swiftly. Then the terrifying sound came again, crashing in his ears, followed by another from the porch as the sheriff let loose a blast. Immediately after, there was an answering crash. The dark object quickly disappeared and there was a low cry of pain from behind the barn. A few seconds later, they heard a horse

(Continued On Page 94)

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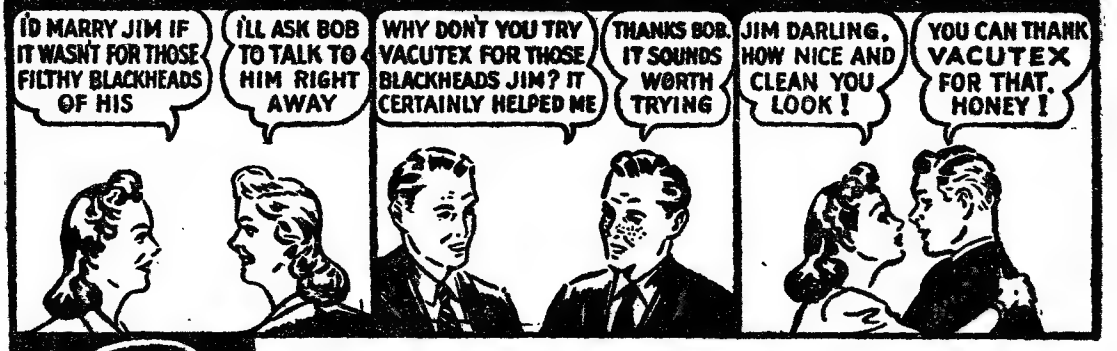
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Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 92)

gallop off in the direction of the road.

Jed sprang up. "Malley! He's getting away!" Then he stopped short. Montgomery was leaning against a porch pillar, clutching his arm. Jed leaped over the dead roan's lolling head and rushed toward the porch.

The air was filled with blood-smells. First, the mare's odor of death, and now, the hot scent of a man's blood, coupled with the acrid odor of gunpowder. That man was Blanco's master; he trotted back up the corral, whickering softly, and stretched his head toward the porch.

JED WAS attempting to stanch the flow of blood from the sheriff's left arm. It was only a flesh-wound, but it was bleeding profusely. Jed tied his bandanna tightly around the wound.

"I'll be all right, Jed," said Montgomery. His leather-tan face was blanched. "Go after that drygulchin' skunk. Take Blanco."

"No," Jed said, resolutely. "You're bleedin' bad. You need a doc—"

"I said, go after 'im, Jed!" the sheriff interrupted sharply. "Ain't nothin' but a scratch. That hombre might lead you straight to the rat's-nest."

Jed hesitated.

"Get goin'!" Montgomery growled.

Jed turned reluctantly and went toward the corral.

"And watch your step, Jed," the sheriff called after him. "Don't try and take on the whole gang by yourself. Just find out what you can and report back here."

At Jed's low whistle, Blanco trotted toward the open gate. He looked around toward the porch as the boy hurriedly saddled him. His long ears pointed up.

Montgomery laughed, softly. "Not this time, Blanco," came the quiet voice.

Jed swung into the saddle and Blanco felt his firm hands on the reins. He started off toward the road. Jed turned and waved, and Montgomery, sitting on the porch steps, rolling a cigarette, nodded.

(Continued On Page 96)

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Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 94)

At the pressure of Jed's knees, Blanco turned and galloped up the road. His rider leaned forward in the saddle. A small cloud of dust was still settling on the crest.

Jed pulled Blanco toward the side of the road as they started up the grade. The recent rainstorms had made a mire of the roadbed and the hard-dried ruts and sinkholes spelled danger for an unwary rider. Under loosened reins, Blanco picked his way over the pit-falls.

At the top of the hill, the reins tightened, and Blanco pulled to a stop. Down below, the road was a twisting, silvery ribbon, stretching out toward dark, tree-studded mountains. It was still and empty; their assailant had had too good a start.

"Got away," Jed muttered. "Too bad, but we can't waste any time pickin' up his trail. We got a job to do." His knees nudged Blanco's sides and they started down the grade at a fast clip.

Blanco leaped ahead as the knee-pressure increased. His rider was urging him to a faster pace for the up-grade ahead. Blanco's flashing hoofs pounded the hard-caked earth, and his stertorous breathing quickened as he started up the incline.

Speeding through the dark mountains, they flew around a sharp bend and heard the roaring rush of a flood-swollen river, not far ahead. A rickety wooden bridge stretched across it, swaying in the raging torrent. As they drew near they could see the cracked floor of the bridge, wet with spray.

SLOWLY, the white horse stepped out on the swaying structure. His rider held the reins close to his neck, watching for weak spots in the spray-soaked flooring. Blanco stepped forward, warily, an uncomfortable feeling along his spine, as the bridge creaked under the lashing of the swirling water. Cold spray whipped at them, stinging their faces. The wet boards made a slippery footing for Blanco's iron-shod hoofs.

Finally, they came out on the other side and Jed wiped his face. He took

(Continued On Page 98)

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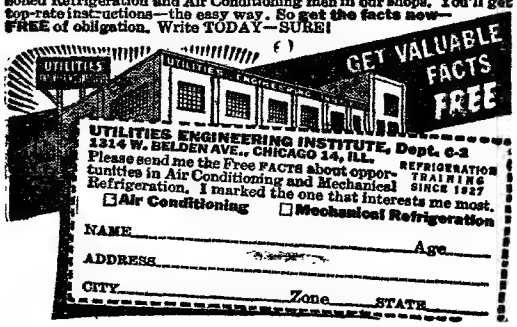

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Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 96)

out a bandanna and wiped the horse's wet head and neck. Then he rubbed the sleek white neck. Blanco snorted, enjoying the warmth produced by the friction of his rider's fingers.

Now Blanco's rider took up the reins and kicked the stirrups. The white one sprang forward and sped down the trail. The road led through a patch of woods, dark and frightening under the swaying trees.

On the other side, they crossed a broad, flat stretch of prairie, cheerless in the bright moonlight, and raced up a steep grade which ran alongside a rocky bluff. The right side of the narrowing road dropped down into a little brush-filled gully. Blanco galloped up the narrow trail, slowing when he reached the top of the hill, as he felt a tug on the reins.

They stopped and surveyed the scene before them. The road dipped down and leveled off, and they could see the lights of Caton City twinkling in the distance. Jed loosened his gun in the holster and then squeezed his knees against Blanco's sides. They tore down the slope at a fast clip.

Caton City was alive with lights. Jed swung Blanco away from the main street and they headed up a narrow lane to the left. The lane curved around two buildings and led to a dirty, sprawling stable. They cut off the lane behind the larger building and Jed brought the horse to a slow walk. Blanco swung his head around; the warm hay-smell from the stable was inviting.

They stopped near a low window and a new smell filled the air—the mingled odor of raw liquor and stale tobacco. Voices drifted out of the open window, and Jed leaned forward, listening.

THERE was a private poker game going on, the voices friendly, cheerful. No evidence of plotting here. They heard the clink of coins and the clack of chips as they turned around. A sudden burst of triumphant laughter amid the chatter of excited voices drifted back to them as they made their way back down the lane.

(Continued On Page 100)

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Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 98)

Jed reined Blanco around the edge of town and they swung up a narrow trail on the other side of the main thoroughfare into a dark back-alley. They passed between two silent rows of buildings looming black in the shadows.

Then, up ahead, came the sound of raucous voices and shrill laughter. Someone was singing an old frontier song, off-key, in a whiskey-tenor voice, to the accompaniment of a tinny piano. Blanco darted forward as Jed nudged him.

They drew up behind a large, grey building. Jed could see the back of the high false-front, facing on the street; and just beyond the corner of the high false-front, facing on the building he could make out the garishly-painted sign swinging in the evening breeze. *Silver Spur Saloon,* the words read above the crude painting of a spur.

As Blanco cropped tentatively at a small patch of grass near the opposite building, he felt Jed dismount and saw him creep toward a back window. Jed crouched down and listened. Thin, wavering clouds of smoke trailed through the open window. There was a quiet mutter of voices. Blanco saw Jed stiffen suddenly.

"—That damn Lost Mule bank this time," came a gruff voice through the window. "We *gotta* pull it different. They'll have a stronger guard, expectin' trouble. The best way is to start a commotion on the other side of town."

"Yeah, Zack, me 'n Muley can take care of that," a squeaky voice put in.

"Hm." They heard the tapping of a pencil on the table top. "Round up Slim and Toby at eleven." The gruff voice held a note of decision. A chair scraped and Jed flattened against the wall as a tall, black-haired man, a quirly drooping from his thin, cold lips, passed by the window.

Jed crept slowly back toward Blanco.

Suddenly his foot fell on something hard and round, and he sprawled headlong. One spur clinked loudly against glass. Behind him on the

rough ground, a discarded whiskey bottle shone dully.

With a pounding heart, Jed scrambled to his feet and sprang toward Blanco. Loud voices flew through the window as he leaped into the saddle.

Blanco felt the pink of the spur and sprang into the alley as a gun barked. His rider jerked against him in the saddle and then he felt hands clinging to his neck. The gun barked again as Blanco fled into the darkness. He could feel his rider's labored breath on his neck.

At the end of the alley, Blanco swung around and tore out of town. Fear drove him ahead ever faster, the thundering crash of pain and death.

The slumped, silent figure on Blanco's back was an awkward burden. The head bobbed against his neck; one arm dangled beside his heaving chest. The boy's ungainly position felt uncomfortable, his weight badly distributed.

Blanco's heart pounded as he labored up the long, steep grade. Clouds obscured the moon, darkening the countryside to a sombre greyness. Clumps of brush beside the trail formed dark, grotesque shapes, as he sped by.

The joggling burden on his back stirred suddenly. "We gotta get to Lost Mule," Jed's voice muttered suddenly in Blanco's ears. "We gotta make it!"

The boy raised his head, blinking his eyes. "Wha—?" He peered around, shaking his head. Then he straightened up, fully conscious.

THE drumming of many hoofs came from the road behind them as they reached the top of a rise. Jed twisted around in the saddle and looked back. A group of horsemen was speeding toward them. They heard the sharp crack of a carbine. Jed gently flipped the reins and Blanco veered off the trail. Slipping precariously, he started down the steep, rocky decline. Then his forefeet slipped on a smooth surface of rock, and horse and rider crashed into the thick underbrush. Jed leapt clear of Blanco and fell heavily on his side.

(Continued On Page 102)

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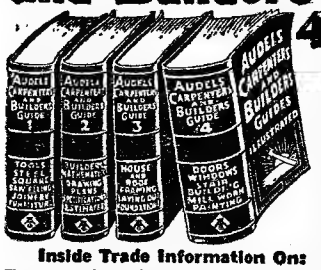

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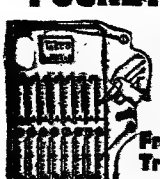

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Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 101)

He lay there, concealed in a thick clump of brush, unmoving. Blanco landed on his side in the dense bushes. For a moment, he was stunned by the heavy fall.

Blanco began to arise, then heard the pursuing horsemen on the road above. He ceased his struggles and lay back quietly. When the thundering hoofbeats died away in the distance, he renewed his struggles and got to his feet. He picked his way through the brambles to the side of his rider and nudged Jed's form with his nose. The man did not move. Tentatively, Blanco raised his right foreleg and gently prodded the still figure.

Jed came to, groaning. He sat up and rubbed his head, then rose painfully. "We gotta get out of here," he muttered.

He was about to mount when they heard the sounds of the returning horsemen. He turned quickly and led Blanco further into the concealing foliage of the gully. Together, they stood in a thick clump of bushes and watched their pursuers pass.

"He musta cut off into the gully," they heard a gruff voice say.

"There's fresh blood on the road up here, Zack," another voice called. "I guess I got 'im square, all right. He won't last long, back-shot." The voices trailed off and soon faded in the distance.

They climbed back to the road, slipping and sliding on the loosened rocks. Jed swayed under a sudden attack of vertigo and clung to the saddle for support. When his head cleared he struggled into the saddle, with a great effort, grunting with pain. He was getting weaker. Suddenly he fell forward heavily against the horse's neck.

Blanco waited patiently for his rider's signal; but the boy was a dead weight against him.

He turned his head, nostrils distended. The blood-smell was strong. Slowly, he started off. At the top of a steep rise he held back and went carefully down the grade at a slow trot.

Blanco's hoofs made a hollow sound

(Continued On Page 104)

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as he trotted through the dark patch of woods. He kept carefully to the middle of the trail to avoid the low, overhanging branches which reached out across the road. He came out on the other side into bright moonlight. The clouds had cleared. Slowing, he came down the trail toward the swaying bridge.

He stepped out on the bridge, hesitantly, then started across at a walk. The bridge groaned under his hoofs; there was a splintering crash and the rickety structure collapsed under him. Blanco and his inert rider smashed into the roiling current.

Blanco floundered amid the splintered timbers, gasping for breath. Jed revived the moment he hit the water. He grasped Blanco's tail and shouted. The horse kicked out against the splintered boards and began to swim, struggling against the swift current. His steel-muscled legs plunged through the cold, swirling water. Finally, he climbed out on the bank, wet and shivering.

Jed collapsed on the bank in utter weariness. He crouched there, swaying drunkenly. "Gotta get the information to Malley," he muttered, drowsily. "Not much time." He struggled to his feet and staggered over to Blanco. Half-blind with pain and fatigue, he felt his way into the saddle.

SHERIFF MONTGOMERY hurried out at the sound of Blanco's hoofs. The horse galloped up to him and stopped, puffing with exhaustion. Jed was humped over in the saddle, his arms dangling beside Blanco's neck. The back of his shirt was a crimson splotch; the saddle was caked wtih blood.

"Jed!" cried Montgomery. He lifted the boy's head. The face was gaunt and pale under the matted hair. "Jed, boy!"

Jed opened his eyes. They were clouded with mist. "Malley! The owlhooters, I saw them! They're gonna rob the bank tonight!"

"Take it easy, Jed," said the sheriff.

"Silver — Spur — Saloon — eleven o'clock— Hurry!" Jed's eyes

(Continued On Page 106)

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drooped; red foam flecked his lips. Suddenly he reached out a hand, clutching at the air, his mouth gaping, and slid from the saddle. He lay at Blanco's feet, a silent, crumpled heap. Whickering softly, the horse nudged him, but this time there was no answer.

Montgomery bent over the boy, his jaw set, grim. Cold fire glinted in his brown eyes. He straightened up and led Blanco to the stable. The exhausted animal hungrily devoured the mound of oats his master poured into the trough.

A little later, Blanco dozing quietly in the somnolent warmth of the stable, was suddenly awake. A horse galloped up to the sheriff's house outside.

Montgomery walked to the door of the stable.

"Sheriff! Sheriff Montgomery!" The high-pitched voice was thick with emotion. There was an impatient rapping on the door of the house.

"Over here, Knobby," the sheriff called.

"They just robbed the Lost Mule Bank again!" the boy gasped. "They back-shot my father! He—he's dead."

"How'd it happen?" Montgomery's voice had an angry rasp.

"They dynamited the old pump at the edge of town and everybody rushed down there—except Pop. He stayed on guard at the bank. They sneaked up behind 'im."

"Jed said eleven o'clock," the sheriff muttered. "He musta scared 'em into jumping the gun." He turned toward the boy. "Knobby, get Zeb Purdy and Ben Cobb and meet me at the Dawson ranch."

BLANCO was still weary after his rest but his heart was eager for action, as he raced along the dusty road, Montgomery in the saddle. The white one sped toward the bleak hill in the distance, a silver streak in the moonlight.

Retracing Jed's route, they came upon the flooded river, a roaring, swirling torrent, threaded with silver. The fractured remnants of the ruined bridge hung over it, swaying gently—

two battered sentinels, saluting each other. The splintered debris had long ago been washed away in the rushing current. His master gave a sharp tug on the reins and Blanco plunged into the cold, foaming swirl.

A few minutes later, a dripping horse climbed out of the freezing water, his body tingling, his silvery coat glistening. For only a moment, he stood on the bank, shaking his head, then spurs lightly touched his sides, and he was off up the moonlit trail.

They turned at the edge of the dark patch of woods and cut down a side-trail toward the big house in the distance. Blanco sped across the silent pasture and drew up in front of the sprawling veranda.

Four sweating horses, bearing grim, determined men, reached the outskirts of Caton City under a darkened sky. Blanco's body, dull silver in the ghostly light, stood out against the other, darker horses. They stopped, snorting, for a minute while their riders talked in low tones. Abruptly, they cut down a back alley and brought up a short distance behind the saloon.

Montgomery turned in the saddle. "Wait here, boys," he said in low tones. Then he gently touched spur to flank, and Blanco started toward the building at a slow walk.

Darkened windows faced them behind the saloon, silent in contrast to the rowdy in front. Coming around the other side of the building, Blanco felt his master stiffen in the saddle. There was a lighted window up ahead. He moved forward slowly, his iron-clad hoofs almost silent on the hard-packed earth.

A shade was drawn across the window. The shadow of a squat little man was cast upon it, humped over in a round-backed chair. The scratching of a pen came from behind the shade.

Further on, another window opened directly on the saloon. They stopped and surveyed the scene in the lighted room. Blanco's nostrils distended; the stale barroom odors were stronger here.

Six rannies were humped over the

(Continued On Page 108)

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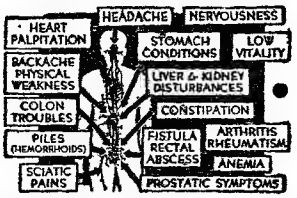

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bar. In their midst, one dusty boot carelessly slung over the rail, stood a tall, thin, black-haired man. He was hatless and his blue-black hair hung over the back of his violently-colored bandanna. A sardonic smile covered his long, bony face.

All six of the gunnies had their backs to the front of the room. Behind them, a few annoyed citizens sat at tables, watching with obvious disapproval.

The tall man, downing a drink, suddenly froze. The sardonic smile on his face stiffened as he stared at the mirror behind the bar. Then his head whipped around, and with a sudden, swift movement, he drew and fired at the side window.

BLANCO had already leapt from in front of the window at the sudden, sharp pink of the spur. He flew across the rutted street and whirled around the building on the other side. His saddle lightened abruptly, and he saw his master creep along the darkened side of the building.

Shots resounded from the other side of the saloon as the posse responded to the unexpected signal. In the safety of darkness, Blanco saw the men spread out around the building. There was a harsh tinkle of glass as a window smashed.

Montgomery, crouching alongside the building, commanded a clear view of the front of the saloon. Blanco saw his arm jerk up, as something dark showed, for an instant, in the light beneath the bat-wings. The man's .45 barked, but the shadow had already withdrawn and an answering shot came from beneath the doors.

There was a rapid exchange of shots. Then they heard a sudden, gurgling gasp, and something fell into the light behind the swinging doors. It was a limp hand, holding a six-gun.

Blanco saw his master beckon to young Knobby, standing behind a column on the boardwalk in front of the next house. Knobby crawled along the walk in the building's shadow and joined the sheriff.

From the other side of the saloon

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came a swift battery of shots and someone inside cursed loudly. The fire from the saloon increased with a sudden viciousness.

The two figures huddled together beside the building in front of Blanco made a distorted shape in the darkness. Then he saw the boy creep back along the walk and pass out of sight.

There was a low whistle, and Blanco trotted forward. His master swung into the saddle and firmly flipped the reins. Blanco leapt forward and went toward the bat-wings at a full gallop.

The tightened reins jerked his head up. Blanco reared and smashed through the flimsy doors straight into the middle of the barroom, sending splinters flying in every direction. He stopped short, his forelegs in the air, as the sheriff pulled back on the reins. There was a glint of steel as Montgomery, almost at the same instant, drew his guns.

The men at the windows presented a ludicrous tableau of amazement, as they squatted there, half-turned, mouths agape, frozen. The tall, dark man, his cold smile completely gone now, stood pop-eyed, oblivious to the blood which dripped from one bony elbow.

"Reach, you drygulchin' scum!" Montgomery's voice had a cold, angry rasp. His long, shining gun-barrels commanded the entire bar.

Slowly, five disgruntled outlaws raised their arms.

The fat, nervous bartender was one of the first to raise his hands. He got up from behind the bar, his pendulous jowls shaking.

"I'm not a part of this, Sheriff," he said. His huge belly moved ponderously, as he spoke. "I just—"

OFF the other end of the bar, a short, fat, bald-headed man stepped out, one arm in a sling. "I'm sure glad to see you, Sheriff." It was Jonathon Crouch, leading merchant of Lost Mule. His round, bald head gleamed with sweat.

The tall, dark man by the wall whirled around. "Why, you back-shootin' son!" he screamed. "You got us into this!" The next instant, a

gun appeared in his long, bony hand.

Two shots rang out, the sounds almost perfectly fused, and Blanco's heart convulsed with fear. Crouch jerked his head back, stupidly. His mouth opened wide but no sounds came out. Blood spouted from a hole, squarely in the middle of his thick neck. The gun clattered harmlessly on the floor as he careened backwards and fell heavily. The whole room shook with the vibrations of his fall.

Then the tall, black-haired ranny whirled on the sheriff—and froze in the act, as a gun crashed from a side window. An odd smile appeared on his swarthy face for an instant. Then he crumpled to the floor.

Knobby stood in the window, a smoking gun in his hand. He stood there, swaying, his shirt-front red with blood. "Beat you to it, Sheriff," he smiled, wanly. Suddenly, he keeled over.

Ben Cobb, standing in the doorway, dropped his carbine and rushed to the window.

"How is he, Ben?" Montgomery asked.

"He's lost a lot o' blood," answered Ben, "but the wound ain't bad. Somebody get a doctor."

"You!" snapped the sheriff, motioning to the bartender with one six-gun.

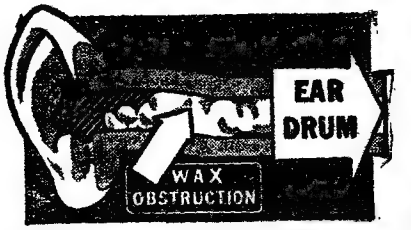
The odor of fear-sweat came to Blanco, as the fat bartender passed nervously in front of him.

The sheriff turned and spoke in low tones to big Zeb Purdy, sitting on the opposite windowsill, his guns held loosely in his big, powerful hands.

Blanco felt a sudden weariness as he stood there, listening to the calm, cool voice of his master. His nervous heart trembled. He longed for the warm silence of his stable.

There was a metallic clatter on the bar, as Purdy collected the outlaws' guns. Blanco wagged his head and the hide on his knees shook as he scattered some annoying flies. He was conscious of the voices of the approving citizens who had come out from behind the upset tables and

(Continued On Page 112)



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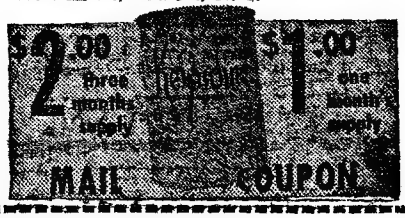

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MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

Complete Cowboy

(Continued From Page 111)

gathered around him, congratulating his master.

Then he heard his master's voice in his ear, warm and friendly now.

"All right, Blanco, boy, the shootin's over." A gentle pressure of the man's knees, and they swung around toward the gaping, shattered doors—homeward bound.

(THE END)

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Complete Cowboy published quarterly at Holyoke, Mass., for October 1, 1945.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of Complete Cowboy and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.: Editor, Robert W. Lowndes, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Business Manager, Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Columbia Publications, Inc., 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.: Louis H. Silberkleit, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Maurice Coyne, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.; Harold Hammond, 241 Church Street, N. Y. 13, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is— (This information is required from daily publications only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of Publisher.)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 26th day of September, 1945. Maurice Coyne. (My commission expires March 30, 1946.) [SEAL]

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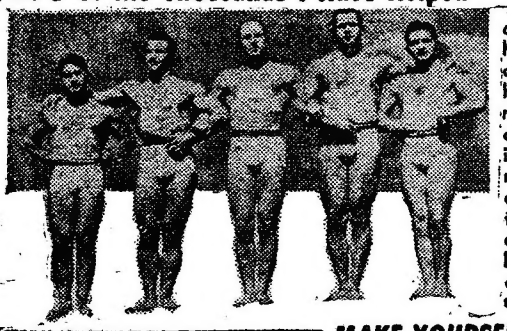

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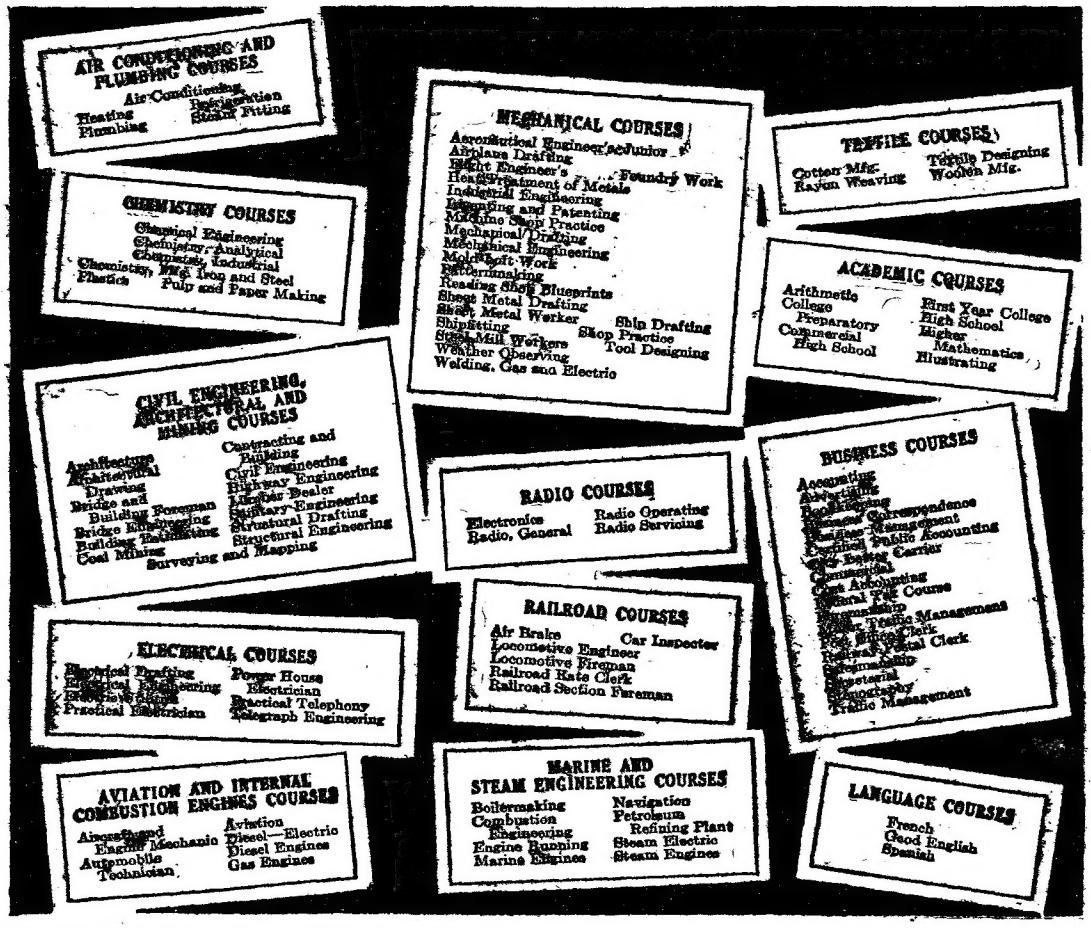

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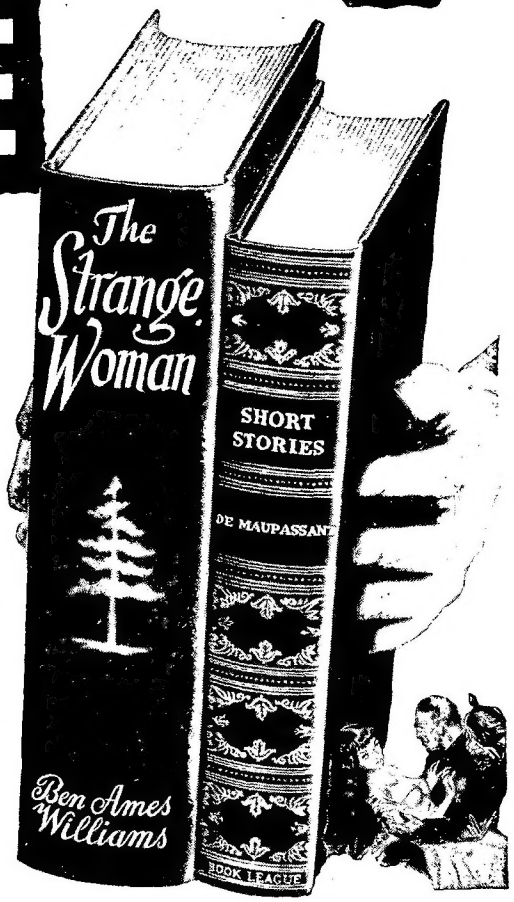

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